

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: **TEACHING THE SACRED: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SYNAGOGUE-
SCHOOL TEACHERS**

Louis Alan Nagel, Doctor of Philosophy, 2009

Dissertation directed by: Professor Francine Hultgren
Department of Education Policy Studies

This dissertation is a hermeneutic phenomenological study of synagogue-school teachers of Jewish sacred text. The phenomenological question that orients this study asks, What is the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a Conservative synagogue-school? This study takes place in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. The writings of Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Max van Manen, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Emmanuel Levinas, among others, orient the study philosophically and methodologically. This investigation of the challenge of making relevant to 21st century American youth an ancient tradition is grounded in sacred texts as well as the author's life experiences, and is metaphorically explored in the encounter with natural landscapes.

Eight third through seventh grade synagogue-school teachers of *Torah* and Hebrew prayer are engaged in individual and group conversations to explore the personal meaning they make of their engagement in this service to the Jewish community. The review of recorded conversations, verbatim transcripts, essays, and notes taken during classroom observations reveal existential philosophic themes that are brought forward in the writings of Heidegger, Sartre, and Levinas. In particular, the existentials of being present, relationship, discourse, and the Other, emerge as powerful openings of the phenomenon in question.

The narrative of this lived experience is the exercise of Buber's I-Thou relationship, one of profound moments of encounter with the sacredness of the text and of the student; time and timelessness; and boundaries to be respected, tested, and breached. At essence the synagogue-school teacher is seen as taking on the responsibility of perpetuating connection to a sacred community, acting in the role of both the prophet as teacher, best represented by Moses, and in maintaining connections that link to Biblical accounts of encounter with God and with divine messengers. Synagogue-school teachers are seen to demonstrate independence, genius, responsibility, and deep spirituality in a unique educational landscape.

These teachers reveal the nature of the synagogue-school as an island of Jewish time, a period rich in engagement with community and sacred text, set in the synagogue environment. A challenge is for the learnings that take place in the synagogue-school to be extended to Being beyond the boundaries of that sacred space.

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
SYNAGOGUE-SCHOOL TEACHERS**

by

Louis Alan Nagel

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Francine Hultgren, Chair and Advisor
Associate Professor Bernard Cooperman
Rabbi Steven Glazer
Professor Arthur Popper
Professor Steven Selden

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2009

DEDICATION

To Faina, my infinitely patient *Eshet Hayil*, who kept my life in balance between College Park, Bethesda, and Fulton.

To my daughters, Margo and Jamie, for the joy and beauty they bring into my life.

To my colleagues and friends who shared my enthusiasm for phenomenology and Jewish education and kept me from getting lost while on this voyage.

To Mom and Dad who taught me to love a quotable line, follow my muse, enjoy the journey, delight in the woods, live in the moment, and pursue my oddball career path.

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In this document I make reference to Mount Sinai, where according to the Torah's narrative the Jewish people received the Ten Commandments and according to *midrash* were given all of the *Torah*. We are told to connect to that moment in our history as if we were there, present for the revelation. Forty years later in that narrative, Moses went to the top of another mountain, Nebo, and according to rabbinic texts looked out and saw all of Jewish history play out before his eyes. Over the course of this research I have had my Mount Sinai moments and my Mt. Nebo moments. The Mt. Nebo moments are ones of looking out at the people who brought me to this *shehecheyanu* moment,

Shehecheyanu has become one of my favorite prayers in Jewish liturgy, a blessing for marking a unique point in time. It is chanted when celebrating a holiday, when doing something for the first time, and when getting something new. Now is a moment to give pause and, like Moses standing at Mt. Nebo, looking out over all of the future of Jewish history, I look out on the many people who contributed to bringing me to this passage.

Jewish tradition has the legend of the *lamed vavniks*, the 36 righteous individuals without whom all the world would descend into chaos. I will leave it up to someone else to declare these people *lamed vavniks*, because the true *lamed vavniks* disappear and are replaced if discovered.

Of the individuals who have brought me to this moment, Dr. Francine Hultgren, has had the most profound influence on me and my work. She opened my eyes to new ways of relating to the world, to teaching, and to the quest for meaning. I am an infinitely better educator than I would have ever been had I not been blessed with the opportunity to be her student. A responsibility Judaism puts on teachers is to raise many disciples. I am honored to count myself among her many disciples.

My dissertation committee is made up of individuals who have also greatly influenced me. Dr. Steven Selden brought me into the department of Education Policy and Administration, brought me to a whole new understanding of curriculum, and elevated my sense of the school as a measure of social justice.

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Dr. Bernard Cooperman hooked me when in 1992 as a guest speaker at a principal's meeting, was asked if Christopher Columbus may have been Jewish. His answer, politely put, was that that matter was beside the point. Thus, I was launched on an interpretive path to understanding Jewish history, challenging assumptions of the significance of people, places and events, which began my shift from an epistemological view of teaching toward an ontological one.

Rabbi Steven Glazer is among that short list of rabbis that I would want to call “My rabbi.” It is my good fortune to have been given honors before friends and family in his congregation. He combines the scholarly rigor of Shammai with the humanity of Hillel.

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CHAPTER ONE:
TURNING TO THE PHENOMENON
OF TEACHING THE SACRED

Bringing 3,000 Years of History and Tradition
to Bear on a 21st Century Moment

I have posted the signboard in the lobby reminding my third-seventh graders that there is a service this morning. At this point in the year, they know to assemble in the sanctuary. About a dozen students enter the large room, while about three times more linger in the “Gallery,” the large hallway outside. This has become their ritual over the years. As is frequently the case, I remind them that they are allowing me to fulfill the verse from the mystical book, the *Zohar*, which says, “All prayer begins with an invitation” and I invite them in to start the service.

Seeing me set up the video projector and laptop computer, the early arrivers immediately begin to pepper me with questions. “Are you going to do another PowerPoint slideshow Mr. Nagel?” “What’s it going to be about?” Is it going to be about Israel?” The oldest of the group, a seventh grader declares, “I know what it’s going to be about, the Columbia disaster.” “You got it, Jason,” I tell the group.

I ask the students to take out their *siddurim* (prayer books) and turn to page 78 and ask them to join me reading Psalm 104. We read:

Let all my being praise Adonai. Adonai my God ...
wrapped in light as in a garment,
unfolding the heavens like a curtain.
On waters You lay the beams of Your chambers;
You make the clouds Your chariot,
riding the wings of the wind.
You make the winds Your messengers,
fire and flame Your servants. (Harlow, 1998, p. 78)

I ask, “Why do you think I chose to begin this morning’s service with this verse. A fourth grader says, “Because of the Columbia crash yesterday.” I thank him and ask the group, what is a connection between this verse and the Columbia disaster? Students point out the references to the stars and the heavens. I ask, “What are our connections to what happened yesterday morning?” Students respond, Ilan Ramon, the first Israeli astronaut, because seven astronauts died and that it was a disaster for the country. I then begin the anticipated PowerPoint slideshow, a collection of pictures gleaned from news sources that kept me up late into the night. Students offer their comments as we look at pictures of each of the seven Columbia astronauts, their preparations for the flight, group pictures, their flight emblem, pictures specific to Ilan Ramon. Also included was a drawing made by a child in a Nazi concentration camp, Terezin, envisioning the view of

the earth from the moon and a picture of Israel taken from Columbia's orbital path.

This all set the stage for the rest of the service. With some prayers I encourage the children to look for references to space exploration. At other moments I invite the children to put in their minds the astronauts and their families.

As the principal of a synagogue-school, I am passionate about engaging students in the experience of Jewish study. The opportunity to gather in the sacred space of the synagogue sanctuary to explore a defining moment that these children might remember for the rest of their lives is to be partner in an extraordinary learning experience. At one level, I maintain a certain allegiance to formal curriculum, carefully organized lesson plans, content to be covered, and a process orientation for the effective presentation of that material. In that regard there is a certain end product in mind, skilled Hebrew readers, attuned to making personal meaning or seeing immediate relevance to the words of our sacred writings. At another level, I live for the open ended, loosely choreographed meeting of minds in which the journey is uncharted, spontaneous, and all but foreordained. It is in engaging with children in the millennium old study of the sacred texts of Judaism that I pursue my life's dream of making the world a better place, as the *Torah* declares, "Justice, justice shall you pursue" (*Torah, Devarim 16:20, Etz Hayim*).

In my synagogue-school, sacred literature, beginning with the *Torah*, continuing through the *Talmud*, and on through various incarnations of the daily prayer book, are the frameworks on which our Jewish educational process is supported. The name, *Torah*, is most accurately translated as "The Teaching." It is the most sacred of our writings and is the foundation document for the past 2,500 years of Jewish religious life. Working with the *Torah*, either a mass produced printed version or a hand written one as has been done in a carefully prescribed manner since ancient times, is an opportunity to connect with

people, places, and ideas linked through the centuries. This journey goes back to a time when, according to the Biblical author, my ancestors left Ur of the Chaldees to settle in Canaan, a trek from one end of the Mesopotamian Fertile Crescent to the other. On a contemporary political map, this would represent a journey from Iraq to Israel (Eban, 1984, p. 5). That this document is referred to as the “Teaching,” explicitly assigns a particular responsibility to those who regard it as anything from the word of God to the writings of an ancient people inspired by the “God Idea” (Mendes-Flohr & Reinhartz, 1980, p. 371). This particular divide defines the difference between the Orthodox Judaism that represents about 10% of world Jewry and holds every letter of the *Torah* as divine, and the remainder who appreciate it as sacred or with somewhat less reverence. I regularly debate the pedagogic implications of adopting the less traditional perspective with colleagues who are in that distinct minority. The dispute is about as sensitive, emotional, and significant as almost any argument.

When I began my career as a teacher, I understood that I was accepting an enormous responsibility. Children and their families expected me to create a supportive learning environment, facilitate academic progress, while nurturing their humanity. The stakes rose immeasurably when my career trajectory took me into religious education. To the extent I wanted to perceive it, my work became divinely commanded behavior. What brought me to that understanding? The process took years, but the path had been well marked. Phrases repeated daily in prayer services such as וְשִׁנְתֶם לְבָנֵיךָ “teach [these words] to your children” (Harlow, 1998, p. 112) and

וְתֵן בְּלִבֶּנִי לְהַבִּין וּלְהַשְׁכִּיל, לְשִׁמְעַ,
לְלַמֵּד וּלְלַמֵּד, לְשִׁמֹר וּלְעֲשׂוֹת
וּלְקַיֵּם אֶת כָּל דִּבְרֵי תִלְמוּד תּוֹרַתְךָ בְּאַהֲבָה

“Grant us discernment and understanding. Then will we study Your *Torah*, heed its words, teach its precepts, and follow its instruction” (Harlow, 1998, p. 111) over time drew into sharp focus my calling. I came to recognize I was presenting an image of a complete circuit, a sacred document. The content essentially was blueprinting a utopian perfection of the world, my responsibility to an entity beyond my immediate grasp, and a calling to teach it. I also accepted the mission to make this all personally meaningful, as well as compelling, to future generations. This has echoes of the narratives I have heard regarding the career paths of teachers and other professionals. Is there something unique in the journey of a Jewish religious educator? What is the influence of working within a milieu in which a sense of the sacred is infused?

This study concerns itself with the meaning of teaching sacred text for synagogue-school teachers. Sacred text, as I have defined it in these opening pages, consists of the following: *Torah*, *Talmud*, and the material found between the covers of a prayer book, regarded by some as “the word of God,” and by others as the writings of profoundly, spiritually, inspired individuals. I draw upon the methodology of phenomenology for this exploration. In keeping with this philosophic tradition (which is pursued further in Chapter Three), I show how I have been claimed by this phenomenon in this chapter. The evolution of my teaching, then, and being called by the sacred is the starting point.

Bar and Bat Mitzvah

It was in the late Medieval period that the tradition of celebrating *Bar Mitzvah* evolved into its current form of the thirteen-year-old male reading from the *Torah* scroll at one of the public, synagogue services and delivering a *d’var Torah*, a lesson derived from verses in that day’s reading (Schauss, 1950, pp. 116-117). The term is Aramaic, an

ancient Middle Eastern language, and means “Son of the Commandment” (Cardin, 2000, p. 209). It refers to assuming responsibility for fulfilling the commandments that guide an observant Jewish life. In the 1920s, Mordecai Kaplan initiated what has evolved to be a full-fledged, egalitarian celebration of this coming of age ritual, *Bat Mitzvah*, “Daughter of the Commandment” (Cardin, 2000, p. 209). Its origins marked the Jewish age of majority. Religiously, it is like an American 18-year-old’s taking on a different level of responsibility for one’s actions, assuming new obligations such as eligibility for the draft, and the right to vote. I would like to believe that calling attention to this milestone, making it a challenging, demanding ritual, may play a role in forestalling, or at least muting, aspects of adolescent rebellion. This is not to say that this contemporary phenomenon is non-existent among Jewish teenagers. It is just that early adolescence had me typically demanding greater freedom and independence. That I was, in the eyes of the Jewish community, an adult, responsible for fulfilling the same religious obligations as my parents and grandparents, was empowering.

It is a derogatory term to label a synagogue-school a “*Bar Mitzvah* factory.” The implication is that the end point of Jewish education in that place is the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* ceremony. I have no colleagues who set that as their aim, nor have I ever worked in a community that overtly accepted that as a standard. However, in our haste to avoid that slander, I wonder what opportunities are missed in the run-up to that event and the days, weeks or months of afterglow following it for catalyzing a more mature exploration of what it means to be Jewish? This ritual is a transformative experience. We are surrounded with objects that alternatively scream and whisper “holy” and fulfill rituals that date back thousands of years, to the Temple in Jerusalem. It is a time when we

literally approach the sacred. Instead of being yards away from the *Torah* scroll and the *aron hakodesh* (the Holy Ark) where it is kept, we are within inches of these revered objects. The encounter can be as profoundly meaningful as our preparation, intention, and imagination allow. I wonder if the teachers in my synagogue focus on this higher order awareness or on a more primal objective. I would propose that therein lays the difference between my more brilliant moments in the classroom and those less inspired lessons.

It is at the coming of age ceremony, *Bar Mitzvah*, that I, like most Jews, first read publicly from a *Torah* scroll. It is my good fortune to have been given the opportunity to repeat the act on many occasions since that early adolescent effort. The experience is invariably powerful, enhanced by the rituals that surround the reading, the focused attention of the assembled congregation, and the understanding of the text and its history. Jewish experience is never superficial. Every moment calls for a ritual, a connection to history, family, and the Almighty.

I recall my nervousness about reading the Hebrew text; a synagogue sanctuary filled with relatives, some of whom traveled thousands of miles to be with us on that day; my first suit; and a completely immature understanding of the ceremony. This later element was the reality for practically everyone present, and I was a more central focus than the words and guidance carried in the texts that were being read over the course of the hour-long service. This was pretty typical of the many *B'nei Mitzvah* (plural form) I went to as an early adolescent. Contrary to the ideals of a more observant Judaism, the actual service, which almost always was a Saturday morning *Shabbat* service, was not what brought us to synagogue. The *Torah* reading also was not particularly what brought us there. It was being a part of the celebration, a life cycle event, the initiation into

adulthood. As I reflect on this experience, I begin to wonder what ignited a passion in me for this sacred experience and how that ardor can be conveyed to others? Is it relevant that within the daily prayers and even the *Torah* are explicit instructions to fulfill this as an obligation? As principal, the message I convey is to several distinct and particular audiences: parents, children, and teachers. The exchange is best described as a dialogue with the subject, ultimately a search for meaning.

Ritual Objects

Among the most lasting connections to the celebration of my becoming *Bar Mitzvah* was the “*kiddush* cup” the rabbi presented me toward the end of the service. I would propose that this is a bit unusual, but this particular cup has its own narrative, a 20 year long history of waiting to be used for the purpose for which Rabbi Baumgarten presumably intended, being filled with wine and blessed as a part of the rituals of welcoming the *Shabbat*. Over those two decades it was home to coin collections, a display stand for a Brooklyn Dodgers autographed baseball, and art object. I wonder how many of the thousands of *kiddush* cups presented at *Bar Mitzvah* celebrations every year in North America experience a similar fate.

In the closing decades of the 20th century, a great deal of energy began to be devoted to making synagogue services personally meaningful. It is not unusual for students to prepare carefully their *divrei Torah*, often engaging in scholarly research to draw meaning from the text. Families prepare guides explaining their synagogue’s rituals and symbols to guests. Community service projects are not unusual exercises carried out in advance of the ceremony, demonstrating readiness to assume adult responsibility. The popularity of books such as, *Putting God on the Guest List* (Salkin, 2000), illustrates a

wide-ranging feeling that there has been a need to recapture the spiritual meaning of this life cycle ritual. A common rebuke has become, “What is more the focus, the bar or the *mitzvah*?” In many ways, this ritual has lost its connection with its original purpose. It is my experience that very few people understand that one becomes *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* simply by virtue of turning thirteen. The ceremony is a celebration of what is already a change of status, technically becoming responsible for fulfilling *mitzvot*, the commandments that guide a Jewish life. I am energized greatly by this kind of evolution of tradition, one of the miraculous processes of rejuvenation woven into the fabric of Jewish life. A slogan of the Conservative movement “Tradition and Change” illustrates the vibrancy of Judaism (Gordis, 1988, pp. 22-23). While the doctrine is based on an ancient document, it displays a flexibility to changes influenced by the nature of the onward march of humanity through time, keeping it perpetually contemporary.

In retrospect, I think the presentation of the *kiddush* cup, was a great choice, full of practical and symbolic meaning. It is a ritual object used minimally once a week in *Shabbat* rituals. The reality is that any glass, cup or tumbler will suffice. The ritual is saying a prayer over wine and drinking it. Like the many ways of extending the ceremony of the ritual, the necessary vessel also can be elevated from a humble paper cup to a brilliantly executed work of art. My recognizing it as a sacred object allowed it to maintain a presence, even if its function was closer to gathering dust than being a tool of active practice.

Aḥad HaAm, a Zionist philosopher writes, “More than the Jewish people have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jewish people” (Baron, 1956, p. 427). At age

30, my *Bar Mitzvah kiddush* cup became the vessel through which *Shabbat* rituals entered my home.

It was a spontaneous act. Candles and wine were usually in the house. We had come to the end of a busy week. I prepared a nice dinner and was setting the table. I took the kiddush cup off of the shelf, cleaned it, and put it on the table. It was not rare for me to put candles on the table, but this evening I did not light them until we sat down to eat. We sat down. I took out the prayer book, checked out the table of contents to find the right page, and began our dinner, first reciting the prayer over the candles, then reciting the prayer over the wine, and then *hamotzi* blessing the bread. (My reflections)

Within the span of about two minutes, I shattered whatever barriers kept me from a tradition that neither my family, nor my wife's had observed since the first decades of the 20th century. Personally, this represented a breakthrough in my Jewish spirituality, the introduction of a form of religious observance that had little immediate purpose other than sacred ritual. Ahad HaAm might have recognized this as a step into the world of *Shabbat* observance, one more Jewish person kept within the fold.

There is a rabbinic expression, cited by Rashi, an 11th century Biblical commentator, "All beginnings are difficult" (Rashi commentary on *Shemot* 19:5). I can feel the power of this wisdom acutely. Making this beginning of religious observance was a significant break from the status quo, putting me out of step with almost every friend and relative. As it was, within that circle I was considered to be the "religious one." This seemed to be taking the characterization to a whole new level. At its most basic, it meant taking myself out of circulation on Friday evening, forsaking "Happy Hours," movies, and sports events. This illustrates a dualism between work and play, a relationship that can be traced to ancient Greece. The lifestyle I was exploring set the dichotomy to a more ancient distinction, between the six days of creation and the seventh day of rest. In an

even more refined vocabulary, the distinction is one between sacred and secular time (Harlow, 1998, p. 299).

I often have been challenged, would you have become ritually observant had you not become the principal of a synagogue-school? I like to believe it is exercising an option with which my life's journey presented me at a Whitmanesque fork in the road. The level to which I "keep the *Shabbat* holy," as it is phrased in the *Torah* (*Torah, Shemot* 20:8), is paralleled by a similar elevation of my observance of other holidays and traditions. I like to believe that in my case, the relationship is reciprocal, that I would have been internally motivated to pursue the fulfillment found in my religious-ethnic group's history and traditions, but being a community professional advanced that process. I have little doubt that it has had an influence on my teaching, adding depth to lessons coming from personal practice and emotional attachment, and making the whole experience of teaching far more fulfilling. This is in opposition to instruction "about Judaism," as if I was sharing anthropological research on a foreign or extinct culture, another professional conundrum of which I, as student, was a good example.

From Kiddush Cup to Am Kadosh

The *kiddush* cup carried other connotations. The word *kiddush*, is related to the concepts sacred and holy. Almost all Hebrew words are created from a three-letter root. These roots, *shoreshim*, are the sources of verb forms, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. The understanding I gained of this aspect of Hebrew while studying in Israel made the language burst to life, and the prayers I had been familiar with since childhood took on meaning beyond their associations with the teachers who taught them, or the times and places I had recited them. The *Shabbat* prayer for sanctifying wine thanks God for this

“fruit of the vine,” the creation of Earth, the liberation of our people from slavery in Egypt, for making us a holy people, and for making the *Shabbat* holy. I find it to be a powerfully evocative prayer, precise in its economy of words, and forceful in its imagery.

As a child, the words of prayer were meaningless, at best, and an interference with the rhythm of a day or time for which I had made other plans to fill. In adulthood, however, I had the good fortune to have the opportunity to develop Hebrew literacy in the near perfect immersion environment of Israel. This served to revolutionize my experience of prayer, above all other benefits, making it meaningful, at first on a literal level and later at an interpretive one. Over time I came to feel this fluency was a treasure that could be made accessible to children and bring to consciousness greater depths of meaning of sacred writings and rituals. My internal teacher’s voice told me that beginning to develop an appreciation for our centuries of tradition, ritual, learning, and living early in life might lead to an appreciation for Jewish study that had been long absent for the vast majority of modern Jews.

I sat down with my 4th grade class. Today we are going to look at the story of Samson. Let me read you this part of the story from the *Tanakh*, that’s the Hebrew word for the Bible. Tell me what you think is going on here. “Then the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, ‘Behold now, you are barren and have borne no *children*, but you shall conceive and give birth to a son. Now therefore, be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing. For behold, you shall conceive and give birth to a son, and no razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines’” (*Shoftim* 13:3-5). As soon as I stopped reading the passage hands shot up, comments were about the angel, no haircuts and what I hoped they would notice: “Samson’s mom is being told how to take care of herself when she is pregnant.” “Pregnant women are not supposed to drink alcohol, it hurts the baby.” I ask, “Is there something in this for people to learn from, today?” “Yea, that pregnant women have to be careful what they eat and drink.” (My reflections)

This was one of my earliest classroom experiences in Jewish education. It led me to believe that I may have been on to something, that children could connect their lives to narratives and traditions dating to antiquity that could be appreciated as having contemporary significance. I know that many of the parents who send their children to my school had the same dreary experience I had as a child in synagogue-school. I also know that most of my students are excited about Jewish study. I know that the children I teach are engaged in the process actively, but I also am aware of what qualities I bring to the classroom that bring that about. My school is filled with enthusiastic students. What is the story of those other classrooms? What narrative brought those teachers to a condition where their students are energized to pursue Jewish learning?

Kabbalistic teachings delight in the interconnectedness between all aspects of life (Steinsaltz, 2001). My taking up the *kiddush* cup, an enormous step forward for my personal sense of holiness, was the culmination of a multitude of random influences. The *Torah* teachings, “You will be holy because I am holy” (*Torah, Vayikra* 19:2) and “You will be a nation of priests, a holy people” (*Torah, Shemot* 19:6) have informed my approach: that an individually defined sense of holiness is the ultimate goal of Jewish education. While for me a significant path to sacred peoplehood was Friday night *kiddush*, for others the vehicle may be any interpretation of the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) spelled out in Judaism’s sacred literature. My journey was deeply personal and probably somewhat anomalous. It is my hope that my professional work is more an effort to apply a life lesson of opportunities missed in childhood to other people’s children than a mistaken attempt to develop a skill in children better attempted with adolescents or young adults. What teaching will inspire my students toward their

sense of the sacred? It is my *Kabbalistic* eye, my *Torah* informed heart, and my *mitzvah* inspired hands that tell me that teaching Judaism's sacred literature serves as a means for self fulfillment, the carrying out of a responsibility to children, an energetic way to bring about a better future, and offering a means to create the connective fabric to mesh the three. Is the mission I have drafted unique? Do the motivations I experience in the process bear the essence of the experiences of others? When, if ever, will the connections crystallize? It is to other teachers and their lived experiences that I turn to in exploring this phenomenological question: **What is the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school?**

Moshe Rabbeinu

The first verse of *Pirke Avot*, a section of the *Mishna*, says,

Moses received the *Torah* at Sinai. He transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, the prophets to the members of the Great Assembly. (*Pirke Avot* 1:1, Kravitz & Olitsky, 1993, p. 1)

Moses has been referred to as *Moshe Rabbeinu*, Moses Our Teacher, for thousands of years, and he has been regarded as much a teacher as a prophet. Among traditional Jews, these depictions are accepted as a fundamental fact and the basis on which the teachings contained in the *Torah* are premised. Such is to convey the reverence many people bring to the *Torah*. Traditional Jewish religious life is built on this document, and as the above quote indicates, it is considered to be the word of God. "*Torah* is an invitation to perceptivity, a call for continuous understanding," Abraham Joshua Heschel, a 20th century Jewish philosopher writes (as cited in Abramson, 1990, p. 32).

There are many paths a person can follow inspired by *Torah*. A person can strike out on one's own, seek council in a community of learners, gain the guidance of a rabbi

or scholar, or pursue endlessly creative options. Heschel's interpretation of *Torah* describes it as a sensitization device. Set against the landscape of the lifeworld, *Torah* can work as an explorer's guide, map, binoculars, compass or field guide. The journey informed by *Torah* is subtly marked like desert trails or high altitude mountain paths that call for vigilant awareness. Just as Edmund Hillary had his sherpa, Tensing Norgay, and the experience of generations of failed explorers, the Everest of *Torah* calls for more than individual courage and uninformed instinct. Acting on *Torah* insight, is best done in a community of learners in which understandings and perceptions can be expressed, tested, and challenged. Much of the beauty is in the words. Just as in English we make choices between synonyms, lyrically making decisions to enhance meaning in the subtle differences, the text of *Torah* is rich in layers of meaning. Heschel writes, "Words must not become screens; they must become windows" (as cited in Abramson, 1990, p. 31).

The Sacred Teacher

The central figure in *Torah*, Moses, is recognized as a teacher who had a unique relationship with God. A closing verse says, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses, who knew God Face to Face" (*Torah, Devarim*, 34:10). Can we imagine a teacher with a more intense relationship with the source of their teaching content? To call Moses' situation unparalleled would be an understatement. The generation of teachers following Moses, whether their subject matter is Judaics, mathematics, engineering, literature or history, can take him as the model for their craft. It would be difficult to challenge the efficacy of parting the Red Sea and whipping 10 plagues on Egypt as audio-visual devices. The population he faced could become unruly, stubborn, and unappreciative. One would think that few would have wanted to be

disciplined by Moses' supervisor, although this intervention sometimes was imposed. Even his being called to assume educational leadership in these various ways are all dramatic examples of what it means to me to be a teacher today.

My spiritual journey has been a long, winding trek bringing me to a position of recognizing the centrality of these sacred texts in Jewish life and an informed appreciation for the role of the teacher. One of the teachers who has inspired me at various points along my career path has been Danny Siegel. My first encounter with him was in a *Torah* study session at a Jewish educator's conference in Toronto, Ontario. A few months later I discovered that he lived a few miles from my suburban Washington, D.C. home, and over the years I have had many opportunities to learn from him. In the introduction to his work, *Where Heaven and Earth Touch* he writes:

Ultimately, my hope is that the student of these texts will, at moments, be swept away, staggered, touched by the sublimity and grandeur of *Torah* texts and their wisdom. The subject at hand is the broadest of all: Living Life with Meaning, The Human Touch. I would wish to engender a certain hunger in the reader, a craving to search ever deeper into the volumes of our tradition—without being intimidated by the quantity or the occasional difficulty of the words. (Siegel, 1996, p. 61)

Danny is a modern Moses, taking the holy word and interpreting it for our time. He recognizes the aimlessness of so much that defines contemporary society and the awesome power the words of *Torah* have to redirect that culture toward the humanistic goals to which most western societies aspire. The Biblical Moses was told by his father-in-law that he had to start delegating leadership if he hoped to achieve his mission. Centuries later, the rabbis of the *Mishna* said, "Raise many disciples" (*Pirke Avot*, 1:1). Danny carries on in that great tradition. I hope to prove worthy of the lineage. What is the role of discipleship in the development of synagogue-school teachers?

The synagogue-school teacher is in so many ways the contemporary embodiment of Moses. Like Moses, these teachers bring to their students the timeless ancestral stories, ancient wisdom, and a sense of awe and mystery. Another aspect of the Biblical narrative is that Moses at times commanded great support, and at others, was frustrated by a population that was described as “a stiff-necked ... stubborn people” (*Torah, Shemot* 32:9). The trappings of contemporary American culture against the deep spirituality and drive for fairness that moves today’s children reflect a mirror image of the community the prophet faced. Do synagogue-school teachers make a meaningful comparison between themselves and Moses? What appreciation is there for the human nature displayed in the primary text of their instruction, the *Torah*, and the story playing out in their classrooms?

Josephus, the historian who documented the Roman conquest of ancient Judea writes, “Great successes never come without risks” (Josephus, 1928, p. 3:10, 2). The unpredictability of teaching injects risk to most pedagogies. The subject matter we deal with even has elements of the unapproachable built in. Can someone with no claim to scholarship question verses of sacred text? What barriers are there to discussion of rituals dating through thousands of years? Can a person talk about God irreverently? A colleague relates her experience in a parent education program on prayer.

While the children were engaged in their part of the lesson I brought the parents to the sanctuary. I told them to take a place on a values continuum. At one end, “Prayer is very meaningful in my life ...” at the other end, “Prayer is not very meaningful in my life.” Parents said, “We can’t talk about that here.” I plowed on, “We have to talk about it here, in the sanctuary” and finally I couldn’t shut them up. They got answers to their prayers ... they were afraid that if they didn’t pray they wouldn’t be safe ... God would abandon them ... further and further on ... I don’t believe in God ... Someone had to come get me, pull me out. They did not want to stop. (Elissa)

This program took place in the most sacred space in the building, the sanctuary. In the presence of the *ner tamid* (the eternal light representing God's presence) and the *aron hakodesh* parents broached the barriers to engagement with the subject. My colleague was highly animated in relating this episode. Parent education is a new paradigm in Jewish education with many synagogues devoted to the development of the project.

Part of the problem is that today's parents represent a lost generation. Much of the immigrant generation that came to America in a period of mass migration from Eastern Europe in the years 1880-1924 was so poor, frequently had to work on the *Shabbat*, and often was so antagonistic toward traditional observance that they took advantage of the opportunity to drift away from religious Judaism. Their children were raised in that atmosphere and the evolution continued to my "Baby Boom" generation that also was a part of the move to America's suburbs. I have a good feel for these parents. If I wanted to claim my work as a holy war (in the sense of a war on poverty, racism or crime), I could say, *We Have Met the Enemy and He is Us* as in Kelly's (1972) book. That would amount to an overstatement, but I use it to illustrate that the parents my colleagues and I work with, are of the same strata within this evolving society. We are essentially all of one peer group. While many of them dedicated themselves to such efforts as developing businesses, advancing professional practices, and academic careers, a corps of us endeavored to revive and recreate a religious tradition that had been evolving for thousands of years until the practice of passing down the collective wisdom, from generation to generation, was interrupted, and sacred knowledge became the domain of a far more narrowly defined critical mass.

For my colleague it was like being Marco Polo, bringing back the wisdom of the Orient to Europe and basking in the enthusiastic response of a court energized by new insights. Her experience was of an audience ready for enlightenment, but a bit wary of the implications. The framework under which she operated was that if we can rekindle the parents' knowledge and enthusiasm, their homes and lives would come to be more supportive of the mission of the synagogue and the school. Was her success episodic, a passing moment of lucidity, the rekindling of a passion that would long glow, or one more engaging experience among many that keep parents returning to the synagogue for more such experiences? Her efforts also were part of the effort to show parents that Jewish education has progressed by leaps and bounds over the experience they had thirty years ago.

Can we also demonstrate to children that this is a worthwhile undertaking, while evoking a similar level of enthusiasm? The children's point of reference is the secular school. In that environment they take tests, get grades, can be failed, are labeled "Gifted and Talented," are disciplined with yellow cards, and told to "keep it on the green." What does the looser discipline of the synagogue-school communicate? To what does the tendency to value the question over the answer and the preference to find multiple meanings lead? What is it like to teach a subject that seeks to build character and empower the individual to work toward improving society? These are questions I intend to grapple with in this study.

A recent lesson I conducted in a ninth grade Holocaust studies class focused on "Power and Powerlessness." Among the many verses we discussed was one sourced in the *Talmud*, "Power buries those who wield it" (*Yoma 86b*, Soncino). Several students

recognized it as saying that there are limits to power and there are responsibilities that go along with influencing change through force. This complimented another text the students understood, that there is always a power greater than the power last exploited. Moved to the context of the course, students applied the teaching to Adolph Hitler and concluded that his failure to conquer the world was inevitable, that his power to destroy, among other things so called inferior races such as Jews and Gypsies, would finally be overwhelmed by an even greater force. I felt cheated by the clock running out as the discussion turned to, “What does this *Talmudic* view have to tell American presidents about future projections of military power and our current engagement in Iraq?” The first comment on that question and the last comment of that evening was a grab at the initial text, “We have used our power and now we are in danger of being destroyed.” I had to cut off the discussion at that point, which is another trait of synagogue-school teaching; the clock always seems to be running out.

Heidegger says that *dasein*, awareness of being, is to be attuned to the limits of time (Safranski, 1998, p. 150). In the teacher’s lifeworld, a particular, unavoidable tension is present in the need to start promptly, the awareness of how few minutes there are to a class, and wishing there were just a few more ticks of the clock available as a new line of discussion opens up, or as the ongoing thread is developing into something promising. In *Being and Time* this tension is labeled *angst*, anxiety: “The ‘world’ can offer nothing more, and neither can the *Dasein*-with of Others” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 232). This is the experience of wanting the lesson to live on, as if there was nothing more to life than that microcosmic world of the lesson.

These are the highpoints for me: using sacred text to open up discussions of the meaning of history and to gain insight into contemporary society. It is an encounter with adept young minds on the path to adulthood and potentially positions of influence in our society. I seek to inquire about the lived experience of teaching the sacred with other synagogue-school teachers. Do they set the stage for these moments of engagement? Do they bring this wisdom of 3,500 years of Jewish history into the twenty first century classroom? What accomplishments bring them back to the classroom, day after day, year after year? What is the meaning of teaching the sacred to them?

There are two festivals on the Jewish calendar celebrating the *Torah*. In the first, *Simchat Torah*, which translates as “Joy in the *Torah*,” the annual cycle of readings is concluded and in the same synagogue ritual the first verses of the beginning are at once read, “So it is that the reading of *Torah* never ends” (Rush, 2001, p. 66). The other festival is *Shavuot*, which according to the *Torah* is a harvest festival, but in rabbinic law became the “time of the giving of the *Torah*—*Z’man Matan Torahteinu*” (Rush, 2001, p. 156). The *Torah* scroll read in almost every synagogue around the world is hand written according to strict rules. They are certified as *kosher*, meaning ritually pure (and the same term as for food fit for human consumption which in Judaism is a ritual act). When the *Torah* is paraded around the synagogue before and after it is read people kiss it. It is an object of reverence. Is there an attitude brought to teaching a sacred text that distinguishes it from a daily newspaper, a work by Shakespeare or any other typical school textbook? Is there an influence of being one in a chain of teachers going back to Moses, a leader-teacher who established an exceptional standard? What is it like to teach under these circumstances?

Into The Wilderness

Among the earliest life experiences I can recall are treks away from the bounds of my home out into the woods, into the natural world. I consider myself fortunate to have grown up on the suburban frontier. In the 1960s, Baltimore, Maryland was in the early stages of suburban sprawl. My neighborhood was a new innovation, an apartment development. Somehow, the process of construction did not include scraping away every bit of flora and fauna from the landscape prior to laying pipes, digging foundations, and bringing in construction equipment as is almost universally the case today. As a result, there were patches of untouched woods between buildings. Better still, surrounding the development on two sides were acres of untouched woods, probably as pristine as they were before European settlers came to this region north of the Potomac River in the early 1600s.

The woods were a great attraction and provoked a sense of wonder. There was an odd tree that after growing about four feet tall made a 90-degree bend and then grew another 10 feet almost perfectly horizontal. We called it the gun tree. There were some phenomenal boulders that provided strategic vantage points to see great distances and some fabulous hillsides that served to open up broad landscapes that could be delighted in year round. It was an environment that provoked me to question how this world came into being and to contemplate the forces that shape the natural landscape.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1958/1994) speaks of, “the poetics of the house” (p. xxxvi). He expands on this theme referring to “house” as “our corner of the world” (p. 4); “All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (p. 5). He goes on to assign that house the role of “the greatest powers of integration for the

thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind” (p. 6). The openness of my suburban Baltimore house lent itself to merging with the surrounding landscape. The innocence of that time allowed my childhood to be a period of discovery, in Bachelard’s terms one of expanding the boundaries of my “inhabited space.” Plunging into the woods like Captain John Smith, the 17th century explorer who brought the first Europeans into Maryland, opportunities abounded for the imagination to be released. The woods proved an attractive direction in which to explore and a fertile environment for pondering unseen power in the universe. In the *Torah*, Jacob awakens from a dream and says, “God was in this place and I, I did not know it” (*Torah, Bereshit* 28:17). I look at that verse and wonder if God was also in those places I inhabited as a child. Was I like the Biblical patriarch, unaware of a divine presence, or was my spirituality already attuned to that manifestation, just unequipped to name it? Bachelard (1958/1994) proposes the image of the house “as a tool for analysis of the human soul” (p. xxxvii). It leads me to believe that this perception of God’s presence was already evident, just the tools for accessing that awareness were not in my hands or if they were, I, I did not know how to use them.

What poetry would I have written if encouraged to write? What insights might I have expressed had I been given the opening, and where would that have led me? In retrospect, I look back on a number of nexus that passed as unexploited opportunities to inspire my religious awakening and promise not to replicate the failures of the past. How enthusiastically I would have wrestled with discussion of the wonders of God’s creation after hours spent climbing trees, looking under rocks, and imitating birdcalls. The daily prayer ending *בּוֹרֵא אֶת הַכֹּל* ... (the creator of all) would have generated an inspired

list had I had the teacher training or inclination to ask such a question. Maybe I was searching without a map or unskilled in using a compass?

Climbing Mountains

It was on a wilderness mountaintop that the Biblical Jacob had his first direct encounter with God. Similarly, the accounts of Moses and the burning bush and receiving “the Ten Commandments” took place in the upper elevations. The mountains are the setting for encounters with the divine throughout Judaism’s sacred texts. It is a terrain that provides the images and metaphors for stories that elaborate on the *Torah* and the liturgical tradition that continues to grow from it. That the topographical setting of the ancient history of the Jewish people played a meaningful role is subject to interpretation. Could those stories have played out along a strip of beach or in an ancient urban environment? Would the narrative have been less meaningful were references to place stripped out, or never entered into the text?

There is a line of Jewish thought that no word in the *Torah* is insignificant. It follows, then, that mention of these settings is inherently meaningful. As readers it is our responsibility to derive meaning from the text. From the crushing of the Bar Kochba Revolt against Roman rule in 135 (Eban, 1984, p. 109) and the subsequent exile of the Jews from their land, to the second half of the 20th century, visualizing the Biblical setting has almost exclusively been a product of the imagination. Is acting on the lure of the mountains a form of spiritual quest? Is it a form of connection with my ancient ancestors conquering the Judean mountains or standing at Mt. Sinai? When I read of a contemporary war in the Afghan mountains do I make a connection to the sites of military clashes between ancient Israelites and their neighbors in the Judean mountains?

My reaction is that these are ways in which I find contemporary meaning in my tradition's sacred literature. These connections are as apparent to me as the relationship between high altitude and thin air. The two are inseparable. The poetry of sacred prayers continually reinforces the conception of God as occupying the high spaces. That literal translation is not necessary for me, and my comprehension of the Almighty goes beyond that, but it is an element of my theology. I don't expect to bring down an updated version of the Ten Commandments as a product of my hikes, but I do bring down a refreshed clarity of purpose, ready to face the "Golden Calves" contemporary society offers in temptation. George Santayana's ubiquitous quote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (1905, p. 284) certainly plays out in the leap from the epic Biblical battles to today's military actions around the world. It is inescapable to miss the similar frustrations of conquering armies, dealing with underground insurgencies, suppression of civilian populations, and resistance to efforts to reshape the conquered society. I attribute finding my way to these connections as wild coincidence. Some might want to attribute it to a grand divine plan, and I would love to believe that I somehow was chosen to communicate a prophetic vision. Would the experience of Jewish study have been radically different in my youth, or for today's children, were it attuned to an agenda enabling students to make connections such as these, to find personal meaning between the content being presented, life's challenges, and the experience of the everyday? Have we reached this point in our evolution as a way of teaching sacred literature? Have we allowed the trail followed by our predecessors to become overgrown? Are we cutting a new trail? What is it like to be either the re-discoverer or the trailblazer?

Deja Vu

And I feel, like I've been here before,
And you know, it makes me wonder, what's going on? (David Crosby, 1970)

In the late 1960s these rock lyrics introduced a generation to the concept of *déjà vu*, a French term meaning “already seen” (*Oxford English Dictionary/ OED Online*).

This phenomenon, in a literal and metaphoric sense pervades the teaching profession.

When a parent calls to comment on their child’s teacher and a passionate account of the story their child related, the details have been rounded out by the parent’s knowledge and experience of the classroom. Similarly, the teacher has an anecdotal account of the child’s behavior informed by classroom experience, the nature of students, interactions, and the process of a lesson. Max van Manen (2003) proposes that investigations into a topic are confounded by our prior understandings. He writes, “We know too much about our topic” (van Manen, 2003, p. 46). As we enter our study it is vital to come to an understanding of the conditions which “predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological question” (van Manen, 2003, p. 46). It is in these opening chapters that I endeavor to frame this inquiry while reflecting on my own pre-understandings.

I am enthused by what van Manen (2003) proposes as themes through which inquiry can be guided. These “lifeworld existentials ... lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality or communality)” (p. 101) inspire a recognition of their confluence with Jewish thought as a fruitful lead. It is a *déjà vu* experience. In the following sections I further explore this framework.

HaMakom: Sacred—Place

A teacher's challenge is to recreate that profound connection between text and the land that inspired its authors, the place, and the experience of it. It is also to make it meaningful in another context if it is to have universality of any sort. As Jews, we are not at the foot of Mt. Vesuvius and among the uninhabited remains of Pompeii. For us, the more compelling locale is the mountaintop city of Jerusalem, for which the Jewish people prayed for almost 2,000 years to return. Mt. Zion is the westernmost hill of Jerusalem, but, since antiquity, the name is synonymous with Jerusalem. A verse in *Tehilim* (Psalms) evoking the dispersion following the Babylonian conquest of Judea says, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and wept, when we remembered Zion" (*Tehilim*, 137:1). An ancient prayer attributed to the prophet Isaiah declares, "From Zion comes forth *Torah*" (*Yeshayah* [Isaiah], 2:3). The vitality of this text is ongoing, like a still active volcano. Since Biblical times Jerusalem has been a site of pilgrimage. People came to Jerusalem, absorbed the experience, and then conveyed its personal meaning to those who had not yet had the opportunity, inspiring the next cycle of pilgrims. What is it like to relate a narrative, and in the process, inspire people to take positive action?

Jerusalem

Of all the Biblical mountains, those among which Jerusalem is located, can be seen as particularly significant since the period depicted in the first chapters of the *Torah*. According to legend, Mt. Moriah is the site of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac. It was conquered by King David and was the place where King Solomon built the Temple. It is called "the Holy City," and the name can be translated to mean the "City of Peace." Jerusalem is atop one of the highest elevations in that region. The surrounding terrain

builds to it. A less than hour-long drive to the west is the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. An equal distance to the southeast is the Dead Sea, the lowest surface elevation on earth. This setting gives the approach to Jerusalem a much more dramatic impact. What gives a sacred space its power to move a person spiritually or intellectually? What is the nature of sacred space? Is it possible to recreate that power in another time and place?

When I have encountered these rocky peaks and the overall landscape, a sense of mystery gives way to a contemplation of the unseen forces that gave the terrain its shape. What Bruce Feiler discovered when researching *Walking The Bible* (2001) was that “Being in Jerusalem and the surrounding region, the Bible is not some abstraction, nor some book gathering dust. It’s a living, breathing entity unencumbered by the sterilization of time. If anything, it’s an ongoing narrative” (p. 11). This tells us that we are on location to some of ancient history’s most decisive moments. The landscape is breathtaking enough, but to encounter the locals who bring the terrain to life makes it clear that there is more to the place than meets the eye.

Exile

Slowly the people adjusted to separation from land and Temple by developing the synagogue which was a perennial place of worship cut off from any permanent attachment to the land. The religious wandering of the tabernacle in the desert was resurrected in the ubiquity of the synagogue and its wandering people. (Friedman, 1978, p. 23)

Removed from their original setting, Judaism’s sacred literature maintained its relevance. Centuries after the Jews were cut off from their roots in the holy land the *Torah* and the body of writings that grew out of it continue to provide guidance on how to relate to the world. This body of wisdom is so attuned to the human condition that its contemporary relevance is immediately apparent. What mountains of reasoning must be

climbed to challenge statements such as, “You shall not kill,” “You shall not steal,” and “You shall not lie”? An aspect that I find so energizing in these verses is not that the values are remarkable, but that they are among the earliest known sources of those ethics. What was society like before a dedication to such values was undertaken? What happens to a culture when it is transposed to a different setting?

As Friedman (1978) attests, the Jewish people “adjusted to separation from land and Temple by developing the synagogue” (p. 23). This sacred space was the creation of a people trying to rediscover their landless nation’s place in the world. It is by this time that God seems to step out of human history. No longer are prophets given instruction, to build, to move or to tell what the future holds. It could be expected that a leadership vacuum would occur, but this “nation of priests” finds a new balance, reinvents itself as “The People of the Book.” What enables leaders to emerge from a group? What attracts a group to coalesce and to maintain its unity? I believe the Biblical book of *Kohelet* [Ecclesiastes] was right in declaring, “There is nothing new under the sun” (*Kohelet* 1:9). The challenges our ancient ancestors faced are little different from those of today. One of my faculty members is fond of saying, “It all comes down to answering, ‘Why be Jewish?’”

Sacred Time

Heschel (1951) writes, “The Bible is more concerned with time than with space” (p. 6). With their central Temple destroyed and exiled from their land following a series of rebellions against their Roman conquerors in the years 60-140 C.E., the Jewish people did not lose their unique identity. Equipped with a philosophy that did not depend on particular points on the map, the community reconstituted itself as it had in its earlier

history, in Egypt and in Babylon. By this point in history, Jewish life revolved around the seven days of the week, dates on the calendar, and sacred moments. Heschel (1951) also writes, “Our intention here is not to deprecate the world of space” (p. 6). He recognizes that “Time and space are interrelated” (p. 6). To not appreciate the world of things would be contrary to one of the first verses in the *Torah*, which Heschel (1951) quotes, “God beheld (what had been created) and saw ‘it was Good’” (p. 6). I take this as instruction that we define ourselves more for the kind of people we are, the way we live our lives than by the temples we build.

Who Shall Stand in this Holy Place?

The earth is the Lord’s, and all its fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein.

For he hath founded it upon the seas, and established it upon the floods.

Who shall ascent into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place?

He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.

He shall receive the blessing from the Lord, and righteousness from the God of his salvation. (*Tehilim* [Psalms] 24:1-5)

Taking the Psalmist to heart, there are no limits to earthbound sacred space. In essence, we are all squatters on God’s property. “The hill of the Lord,” however, refers to one of the hills in Jerusalem, clearly, an exceptionally sacred space. It was to be the site of Solomon’s Temple. The synagogue replicates that majestic place on a less grand scale. The symbolism of the sanctuary is based on that ancient Temple.

The Psalmist essentially composes a test for evaluating who is worthy of occupying those most sacred spaces. They are questions I often have posed to myself. What are the qualities required of a teacher of a sacred tradition? By what virtues can I, and my many colleagues, make the claim toward communal leadership? As a teacher,

principal or in any of a number of positions I have held, this has tempered my behavior. Are my hands clean? Do I have a pure heart? Is vanity figuring into my decision making process? Am I being honest?

Synagogues are recreations of the Temple that stood in Jerusalem. I hold myself as worthy of the responsibilities entrusted to me. I hope that my colleagues have wrestled with the same questions and arrived at conclusions they find satisfying. Are these values against which we constantly check ourselves? What do we do to earn God's blessing?

Torah to Morah

This sacred text, the *Torah*, is translated to mean, the Teaching. *Morah*, the Hebrew for teacher, shares the same etymology. By this linkage our connection to the primary documents is inextricable. It is the responsibility of the teacher to nurture the expert in every student and raise the next generation of *B'nei Yisrael*, as the Jewish people are sometimes referred.

B'nei means "Children of," a poetic phrasing of "descendants." *Yisrael* translates into "one who wrestles with God." The connotation implies that as individuals we are inheritors of that struggle, the relationship between God and I and between sacred text and I that is the product of a millennia old match. As a teacher, the struggle is sometimes compounded, sometimes lightened by the duality of being both teacher and lifelong learner, a student in effect. An illustration of this bi-polar order is a *Talmudic* teaching, "Rabbi Hanania said: I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, and from my students more than from all of them" (*Talmud*, *Ta'anit* 7a, Steinsaltz).

I recognize that climbing is best done with a partner. As a synagogue-school educator, the mountain I want my students to climb, metaphorically, is Sinai, the site where our sacred literature first took form. The concept of being present for the receiving of the *Torah*, in a literal or metaphorical sense, is deeply ingrained in Jewish tradition. Heschel (1951) writes, “The day of giving the *Torah* can never become past; that day is this day, every day. The *Torah*, whenever we study it, must be to us ‘as if it were given us today’” (p. 98). In her Jewish feminist manifesto, *Standing Again at Sinai*, Plaskow (1990) writes, “Women have always known or assumed our presence at Sinai ... Of course we were at Sinai” (p. 27). She then goes on to speak from her activist perspective of the ongoing vivacity of this text in saying, “Jewish feminists, in other words, must reclaim *Torah* as our own” (p. 28). Not to mitigate her proclamation, but I act from the position that this is the individual obligation of all Jews. While these sacred texts are of ancient vintage they are treated as if they reflect an ongoing, contemporary event. If these readings were broadcast on CNN instead of read in a synagogue sanctuary, a banner reading “Live” would be in the corner of the screen. What is it like to suspend the barriers of time in the process of studying text?

Makom Kadosh: Sacred Space

Traditionally, the synagogue is described in three ways, as the *Beit Tefillah*, *Beit Knesset*, and *Beit Midrash*, that is, a house of prayer, house of assembly, and house of learning. One of the most beautiful, balanced aspects of teaching in a synagogue-school is that we bring together those ideal aspirations. In a prayer service we bring together sources from our most ancient texts to unite as a community, elevate ourselves spiritually, and reflect on our lives to understand our life world better.

Responding to a disaster like the Space Shuttle Columbia explosion, the events surrounding September 11, 2001, the so called “Beltway Snipers,” or Middle Eastern war and peace, our school provides a context for confronting fears, enriching experience, opening up discussion, and searching for meaning in dramatic human events. Ultimately, the questions we wrestle with are: Does Judaism have something to say about a given topic, and does our religion offer guidance? It is always exciting to use the opportunity of a major event shaping the lives of our children to discover a Jewish connection, a textual connection, and an obligation. Taking our liturgy and making a direct connection between it and an event that is meaningful to the lives of my students is energizing. Getting students to think deeper about the world and to see the synagogue as a place to explore events and such phenomena, is the challenge I rise to every working day.

I face this challenge as the principal of a synagogue-school. My work with students is no longer that of a classroom teacher’s day to day, September-June experience. I am sufficiently self-aware to recognize the experience that brought me to my position and what motivates my ongoing enthusiasm. One of my chief responsibilities is that of a supervisor. Above all I work closest with teachers. I have spent countless hours over the past 18 years in this role. They teach the *Torah*, *tefilah* (prayer), other books of the Bible and bring into play teachings of rabbis dating over the course of over 2,500 years.

The Place of the Principal

This title “principal” is a term that has broad connotations in American society. The role of disciplinarian is prominent in people’s thinking, best illustrated with the frequent comment people make about “being sent to the principal’s office.” This is

actually pretty far from my personal experience as principal, and is not directly referred to in dictionary definitions or in any of the synonyms in *Roget's Thesaurus*. Principal is a 14th century term. Its etymology traces from Middle English, to Old French from Latin *principalis*, from *princip-*, *princeps* (*Miriam Webster On Line*, <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>, November 27, 2003). In this source, the primary definition is “most important, consequential or influential.” I find these terms fall short of describing the position. “Most important” is particularly painful as it runs against my preference to be collegial and egalitarian. I see myself more as a resource, a person occupying a position within a horizontally organized institution. Everyone is equally important. I have little doubt that students, teachers, and parents can be equally or far more “consequential or influential” through their actions. There are moms and dads who volunteer to serve as room parents and actively seek opportunities to play a role in the school, and students who set a tone for their classes through their level of engagement. Aoki (2005) reminds us that “*principal* was at one time understood as principal teacher—first or leading teacher” (p. 435). He understands that as the title is redefined as administrator or manager, we enter ever the more “dangerous” (Aoki, 2005, p. 436) territory of adopting business models. Aoki (2005) connects principal, education, and pedagogy to “principal as leading teacher ... one who leads others to new possibilities by following the essentially true of what education is” (p. 436). This is a far cry from the disciplinarian. It is closer infinitely to the leadership role that is earned through respectable participation in the educational enterprise.

Another definition of principal starts with “one who holds a position of presiding rank, especially the head of an elementary school or high school” (Pickett et al., 2000, p.

213). This also fits a hierarchical scheme. I find that my conduct is more in keeping with the alternative definitions offered. Seen as “a main participant in a situation” the life of the school, the classes, exchanges between teachers, students, and parents have a certain independence, a life of their own, but the principal has a role in everything. A performing arts metaphor is invited in the description of “a person having a leading or starring role.” The synagogue-school principal is almost literally the marquee name, usually listed among the congregational leadership, formally on the stationary, and usually the signatory to letters and communication such as registration, field trips, and certificates.

It is the definition within the realm of Law that I would most actively promote as a mindset, “a person who empowers another to act as his or her representative” (Pickett et al., 2000, p. 213). Acting in this way is when I am at my best. This definition, further refined as “the person having prime responsibility for an obligation” (Pickett et al., 2000, p. 213) provides the balance between my leading, starring role and the surrounding cast. It is my responsibility to choose teachers and aides carefully, to brief them on their role within the organizational scheme, to come to an understanding of the vision and philosophy underwriting our approach to Jewish education. In short, it is to “empower.” This approach also carries out to parents and students who are really the *raison d’être* of the school. “Schools are not job programs for teachers,” thundered a professor in an education administration course. Teachers are in the classroom for the students; it is not the other way around. For a synagogue-school, empowerment is what the program is all about. The lessons taught on holiday observance, prayer, and *Torah* study are often exercises in recovering traditions and rituals that have ceased to be a part of home

practice. The extent to which students and parents revive these traditional means of Jewish expression is evidence of a program's success.

“One who commits or is an accomplice to a crime” (Pickett et al., 2000, p. 213) is the last part of this legal definition of principal. Taken at a poetic, metaphoric and historic level, teaching Judaism often has been a criminal act. In the Soviet Union, teaching any religion to a minor was on the books as an activity that could lead to time in jail (Gilbert, 1984, p. 82). Despite that threat numerous individuals organized Jewish studies classes as Jewish life was reenergized in the years after Israel's military victories in the 1967 Six-Day War. The Maccabean Revolt (167-164 BCE) that is celebrated on *Hanukkah* was a rebellion against a ruler who destroyed houses of study and made teaching *Torah* a crime (Graetz, 1940, p. 467). Similarly, the revolt against the Romans almost three centuries later was also precipitated by prohibitions on Jewish ritual life and teaching. On Yom Kippur there is a recitation of the stories of the ten martyred rabbis, killed by the Romans for defiantly continuing to teach *Torah*. The story told of one of those rabbis, *Hananya ben Teradion*, is that the Romans wrapped him in a *Torah* scroll and burned him at the stake. As the flames consumed the sacred text he told his disciples, “I see the parchment burning, but the letters are flying free” (Harlow, 1972, p. 559). My appreciation for this definition and this history connects to a popular book that was conspiratorially circulated among my undergraduate education classmates, *Teaching As A Subversive Activity* by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969).

From my first teaching experience in a recently integrated Virginia public school system through today, I have seen education as a means for rebelling against the injustices and inequities of the social order. The teachers I always have felt most

comfortable with are the ones who nurtured that revolutionary spirit, while the ones who are wedded to the tyranny of tests and measures, rules and order strike me as traitors to the cause, enemies of the people. What is the role of the principal in organizing this criminal conspiracy we call education? What inspiration can be taken from the stories of those who made the ultimate sacrifice doing battle with the pen versus the sword?

Kedushat Hashem

Jewish history is populated with heroes and martyrs. Rabbi Hananya is associated with nine others who were executed for acting to preserve Jewish study. The medieval period is replete with rampant destruction: Crusaders making side trips to wipe out Jewish communities and townspeople whipped into a frenzy of Jew hatred going on murderous rampages, the Spanish Inquisition hunting down converts secretly carrying out Biblically prescribed rituals, Russian pogroms in the nineteenth century into the first decades of the twentieth century, and finally the Nazi Holocaust taking the lives of six million Jews solely for the reason that they were born of the tribe of Abraham. The term applied to these circumstances is *Kiddush Hashem*, the sanctification of God's Name. Throughout the centuries my ancestors have been willing to endure being burned at the stake, stabbed, hacked, clubbed, shot, and gassed, in essence, to accept the most brutal behavior the human imagination has been able to conjure, based on faith in the one God. Were these people any different from those in the community to which I belong? What does it take to stoically face down a knight with a sword, a neighbor with a club, a fellow lover of Mozart and Beethoven with a can of Zyklon B, knowing that their brutality and rage dehumanizes them as you are uplifted, spiritually above their inhumanity? What makes *kedusha*, holiness, so awesomely powerful?

Heschel connects holiness to a primary sense of “awe and wonder” (as cited in Abramson, 1990, p. 32). He writes:

The beginning of awe is wonder ... awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine ... a moment of awe is a moment of self consecration. They who sense the wonder share in the wonder. Those who keep holy the things that are holy shall themselves become holy. (Heschel, as cited in Abramson, 1990, p. 32)

If I asked myself how I got to a stage where I am attuned to holiness, Heschel’s wisdom may offer a roadmap to my past. Did I proceed from a wonder of my natural landscape, to awe? Did awe open me up to my first wisps of God’s presence? This definition tells us that the path to holiness is in sanctifying what is holy. Are these objects of sanctification actual objects? Idols fashioned out of clay? Rock stars, home run kings or the almighty dollar? Heschel assigns the parameters as what we “affirm to be beyond our power” (as cited in Abramson, 1990, p. 32). Abramson (1990) points out that the “objects of holiness are culturally relative” (p. 32). This leads me to wonder, what objects, what culture did that roadmap take me through? How many objects did I cast aside as garbage? What held lasting value and will continue to hold value?

Abramson offers the idea of the “realm of response,” what Heschel terms “underived insight” (as cited in Abramson, 1990, p. 32). This is “the living encounter with reality (taking) place on a level that precedes conceptualization, on a level that is responsive, immediate, preconceptual and presymbolic” (Heschel, as cited in Abramson, 1990, p. 32). It is my conclusion that somehow, for me, Mick Jagger, Hank Aaron, and principal as a “capital sum of money” (*Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1913, p. 1138*) at some point lost their sanctity as the objects for which they were appreciated and were either replaced or redefined in ways in which they could be seen as “precious to

God” (Abramson, p. 32). Jagger came to be appreciated for his extraordinary creative talent; Aaron for his courage and humanity; and wealth, beyond providing for basic needs, became *tzedakah*, money that can be donated to advance humanitarian causes.

I am motivated by the potential to ignite a sacred spark, to be the influence in a child’s life that moves that person toward perceiving the sacred dimension. I see the holy in the people children interact with, the spaces through which they move, and the natural phenomena that go on all around. Abramson (1990) sees this opportunity as lying at a “nexus between thinking and feeling, which is more basic than the cognitive/affective split” (p. 32). I believe a guide has to have experienced journeying into the unknown. Such is the case for the likes of Lewis and Clark, Neil Armstrong, and Sir Edmund Hillary. All of these explorers led groups whose motivations may have been less noble than expanding the boundaries of human endeavor, but that was their lasting achievement. Likewise, a Hebrew school class is not always as inspired by the reward of connecting with the ineffable. This is far from a stumbling block. I draw on the same inner resource that teachers around the world, at all levels of the educational spectrum draw on, a sense of responsibility to another generation, the one before us in a classroom, and the future into which they will carry their understandings.

A colleague recalled her experiences to me in teaching. Like many I work with she had, “no formal training in Judaics.” Stepping in front of class for a history lesson, she says: “I found that I knew things I had no way of knowing. It was like I was channeling ... It was so spiritual.” The *yeshiva* method of Jewish study is *hevruta*, study partners. This idea is reinforced by the rabbinic wisdom:

Rabbi Hama son of Rabbi Hanina said: What is implied by the verse ‘Iron sharpens iron’ (Proverbs 27:17). It tells you that just as one piece of iron sharpens

another, so two scholars sharpen each other's mind by discussion of the Law.
(Bialik & Rawnitsky, 1908-11/1992, 428:260)

I have always been energized by the challenge of teaching. It calls for reaching inside for resources we often did not know were present. In my colleague's case the reaching, or the grasping, may have been in another direction. What is the embodied experience of teaching? In what ways does it reach the spiritual? What is the lived experience of teaching Jewish sacred text in a synagogue-school setting?

Teaching The Sacred and Phenomenological Inquiry

Religious education has been a primary cultural value in Jewish communities dating to antiquity. As I have begun to document, there are centuries of commentary on the nature of schools and teachers attesting to this primacy. For over two thousand years the same sacred texts have been studied, taught, and used as a guide for individual and communal life. While Jewish life has stood the test of time, the Jewish community in America is going through an existential crisis. Interfaith marriage is seen as an erosion of our population. Assimilation into a welcoming American society that is very much in synchronicity with Jewish ethical values is having a similar impact. The future of American Jewry is being contemplated with concern on the part of many communal leaders. As solutions are proposed a persistent question crops up, what does research say? Sartre offers an answer, "It is evident that non-being always appears within the limits of a human expectation" (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 7). While research data are expected, on almost any aspect of Jewish education, it is essentially in a state of "non-being."

Jewish education historically is referred to as *Talmud Torah*, literally the study of *Torah*. In essence, all Jewish study is derived from the *Torah*. While Jewish education has few standards against which to measure success empirically, an investigation into the

experience of teachers of Judaism's most sacred teachings offers a rich opportunity to bring to consciousness an understanding of contemporary Jewish education.

There are many fine synagogue-schools. I look at the curriculum outline for one congregation's school and I see a well-constructed program including Hebrew prayer, various aspects of Jewish history, Ethics, Bible, and Israel studies among topic headings. I look at another school and see another serious program of study with a greater emphasis on Bible and less on ethics. The experience of a student in yet another congregation's highly respected program, on paper, is also a product of careful consideration with Hebrew not appearing until relatively late in the program, but ethics playing a primary role from the beginning. That said, a researcher, hoping to affect an empirical standard on these programs would be hard pressed to identify a commonality that could apply reasonably across these programs. There are so many additional, random variables that statistics would be rendered somewhat meaningless. In one school students learn to decode Hebrew as five-year-olds, in another at age eight, and in yet another, the language is not given any priority. In one school *Torah* study begins at age seven, in another at age nine. The study of Israel infuses the curriculum in one program, while it is virtually ignored in another, and is the focus in one grade for a third. Such is the landscape of Jewish education for almost every primary topic of study. Just as curriculum varies widely from school to school, the experience and support for individual student learning also offers very little consistency. Given these factors, this exploration calls for an approach at variance with quantitative, empirical study.

After contemplating a variety of interpretive methodologies I have chosen to pursue a phenomenological approach initially described in the first decades of the 20th

century by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Macann, 1993). While phenomenology is a methodology as well as a philosophical approach, I believe it will be the most effective means of exploring this phenomenon since it is a study of lived experience. In terms of Husserl, and those who further developed the approach would use, this is a study of the lived experience of teachers of sacred literature. My focus is on synagogue-school teachers of Judaism's sacred literature, primarily the *Torah* and Hebrew prayer.

Phenomenology is geared toward exploring and interpreting meaning of lifeworld phenomena. My interest is in pursuing the hermeneutical approach advanced by Martin Heidegger (1927/1996) and further developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1975) and Paul Ricoeur (1995). In my case this approach leads to a rich description of lived experience, that of synagogue-school teachers. Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer allow that this will be interpretive, and such study advances the concept of confronting pre-suppositions as I have in these first pages. I find this approach remarkably consistent with approaches traditional Judaism has employed for its own method of reflecting on lived experience. Sacred texts have served as both the source of insight and as the template against which lived experience is validated. Gadamer's (1960/1999) work on language, communication, and human interaction are of particular value. Ricoeur's (1995) studies of the impact of myth, religion, art, and language and his commentaries on the meaning of being also significantly influence this study. In addition, it is my intention to bring into play the more existential branch of phenomenology. Questions such as, "Do we see ourselves as others see us?" resound loudly in the experience of the classroom teacher. In

this regard, the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Emanuel Levinas appear in my efforts to explore this phenomenon.

This area of research is described by van Manen as human science (2003). A successful effort will be an “adequate elucidation of some aspect of the lifeworld ... (recognizable) as an experience we have had or could have had” (p. 27). The attitude of Gadamer is reflected in van Manen’s (2003) statement, “The method of phenomenology and hermeneutics is that there is no method” (p. 29). That said, the philosophical orientation under which this project is pursued is within the “tradition ... body of knowledge and insights, (and) history of lives of thinkers and authors, which, taken as an example, constitutes both a source and a methodological ground” (van Manen, 2003, p. 30). Operating from this position, “six research activities” described by van Manen (2003), inform this project:

1. turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

It is my belief that hermeneutic phenomenology offers the best opportunity to begin to understand what it is like to be a teacher of Jewish sacred text. Just as physicists have a respect for “laws of physics,” lawyers work in a milieu bounded by the “rule of law,” and physicians are guided by definitions of healthy and sick organisms and protocols for dealing with maladies, synagogue-school teachers begin their work with a body of texts that carry an aura inviting previous understandings to be conveyed, explored, sometimes debated, understood, given meaning, and tested (challenged) in their relevance, influence,

and meaning. It is my goal to gain a greater understanding of what it is to be a teacher of sacred literature. It is not a field that I believe can be studied empirically. It would be possible to measure how many words a student can translate, Hebrew verses that can be read fluently, and how many *mitzvot* students fulfilled, or even if they performed particular ones. But it is not known if any of these truly figure in creating lifelong, practicing Jews, the *Am Kadosh*, the holy people, held out as the ultimate goal of Jewish education. There are committed Reform Jews who know little *Torah* or *tefillah*, but are leaders of their congregations. There are Orthodox Jews who care little for the *mitzvot* of *Tikkun Olam* working toward improving the lot of non-Jews.

My work is in the Conservative community. An old joke describes the difference between the three main streams of religious Judaism as Lazy, Crazy, and Hazy. This refers to the Reform movement's more lax demand for fulfillment of *mitzvot*, the Orthodox tendency toward zealous, fastidious observance, and the Conservative community's spanning the boundaries between the other two. Since no one has returned from the future to say who is right, and the past has demonstrated little predictive validity, no one can authoritatively say what path is guaranteed to bring about a vibrant Jewish future, and that the others proved to be spiritual dead ends.

Throughout history we have asked ourselves, "What does it mean to be a Jew?" That there is no single, definitive answer is perhaps what best sets me on the trail charted by the phenomenological philosophers. The definition reaching back to ancient times, "a person born of a Jewish mother" fails to acknowledge the five most prominent figures in the *Torah*. The interpretation that Judaism is a religion of "deed over creed" holds more water, defining us by what we do, not what we believe. So is there a difference between

giving money to the poor out of some innate urge or because it is a *mitzvah*, commanded by a verse in the *Torah*, and is that what makes being Jewish meaningful? A Talmudic teaching says, “The study of the *Torah* surpasses them all [*mitzvot/commandments*]”; implying because it leads to them all (*Talmud: Shabbat* 127a, Soncino). In our daily prayers we remind ourselves, “to study and to teach” and that “you shall teach (this Teaching) to your children.” It is not a stretch to say that as a community, the Jewish people have, as an inheritance a profound document that has the potential to be a guide to a world of peace and justice. Our tradition affirms the belief that the way to bring this about is through study, teaching, and concrete action. My interest in bringing about that world and a Jewish way of making it a reality involves turning my attention to those most central to bringing it about. And, so, I turn to this phenomenological study of **the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school.**

My Itinerary

The journey I have embarked on is one of exploring the lived experience of teaching sacred literature in a synagogue-school setting. In this first chapter I have unpacked experiences that have brought me to my present interest in exploring what this experience means to others. While I carry the title “Principal,” my inclination toward fulfilling that role is well described by Aoki (2005) as “first or leading teacher” (p. 435). I have begun exploring what it means to teach material considered by many to be the word of God. I began to question the role of tradition and history, and our attachments to life-cycle celebrations and ritual objects in this phenomenon. What is the sense of mission teachers bring to the classroom? What is the influence of the powerful figures who represent milestones in the several millennia march through history of the Jewish people?

And conversely, what is the influence of the forces of assimilation that are essentially contemporary phenomena? Where does God fit in this whole experience? Are sacred texts regarded as holy, and by whom? What is the role of time and place in synagogue-school teaching? In the process, I have begun to mark my trail with philosophical guideposts, writings of Heidegger, Sartre, Gadamer, Buber, Levin, and Ricoeur, and a methodology advanced by van Manen (2003). Consistent with the philosophy of phenomenology, I have sought to expose my assumptions and pre-understandings of the phenomenon. I further explore the philosophical underpinnings of this study in Chapter Three.

Chapter Two continues the exploration begun in this first chapter. It is intended to open up the phenomenon further of teaching sacred literature in a synagogue-school setting. It is multi-layered; exploring an idea exposes a different take on the same terrain. I draw on preliminary conversations with administrative colleagues, to get a sense of the phenomenon from their perspectives, reflect further on my experiences in the field, and explore samplings of Jewish lore, as well as contemporary writings on the state of Jewish education, in an effort to open up the phenomenon in advance of the research carried out with teacher participants in this study.

Chapter Three is devoted to a discussion of hermeneutic phenomenology, a philosophical approach to the lifeworld, grounded in a school of thought that grew out of Germany the decades preceding World War II, drawing upon such philosophers as Husserl, Heidegger, and Gadamer.

It is in Chapter Four that I begin my interpretation of themes that emerge through my research conducted with teacher participants. Ideas, concepts questions first raised in

previous chapters will inform discussions with synagogue-school teachers. Heidegger's concept of *dasein* (being there) serves as an anchor as these teachers of sacred literature bring to life the essence of their experience.

My final chapter explores the implications of this study, making meaning of synagogue-school teachers' lived experience. What could this study mean to students, parents, administrators, and anyone who cares about those who have taken on the responsibility for seeing that the *mitzvah* (commandment) of *Talmud Torah* (Jewish study) is sustained for yet another generation? I also seek personal insight into the lives of teachers that will emerge from their reflections on practice.

In a folktale related in the *Talmud*, the land of Israel was suffering a terrible drought. Wells were drying up, crops were failing, and animals were dying. The king called the people together to pray for rain, but no rain came. He called on the most esteemed members of the community, landholders, great men, wise men to pray, but still the rains did not come.

Then there stood forth an old man, poor and in mean clothing, and he made his prayer, and lo! The sky was black with clouds, and there was a sound of abundance of rain.

Then the king and his counselors and his captains, the priests and the wise men, gathered around that poor old man, saying, "And who are you whose prayer has prevailed with God, so that He sends rain upon the earth?" And he said, "I am a teacher of little children." (The *Talmud*, as cited in Silverman, 1971, p. 65)

This story has a lesson, about miracles, self-esteem, respect, and honor. How do synagogue-school teachers relate to this tale? In the following chapters the path I follow is through the territory of synagogue-school teachers of sacred literature, exploring their relationship with the sacred text they teach, their students, and the adults with whom they interact.

CHAPTER TWO:

MOVING CLOSER TO THE PHENOMENON OF TEACHING SACRED LITERATURE

I take this group of fourth graders and at the beginning of the year they can barely read Hebrew. They struggle to learn the letters, to read from right to left. I have to remind them ... I draw arrows on their books pointing right to left. They confuse *resh* and *dalet*, *shin* and *sin* and at the end of the year, they can chant *V'Ahavta*. I listen to them and it is beautiful. (Eve)

Eve, a synagogue school teacher I met while on an Israel study trip, reminds me of the inspiration that first attracted me to Jewish education. In so many of the subject areas we teach, the children epitomize the *tabula rasa*, the blank slate, that educational theory once embraced. Until she begins to guide the children through the mysteries of the Hebrew language, the children may as well be staring at Egyptian hieroglyphics before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. Eve takes something personally meaningful, a prayer that has been chanted for thousands of years, that contains the core of Jewish belief, including the obligation to teach this religious tradition to the next generation and fulfills that *mitzvah* (commandment), making herself a participant in ensuring that the so called “chain of tradition” remains unbroken. In the process, she leads children far enough so they can begin their own search for meaning in the religion. What is the source of Eve’s satisfaction? Is it caught up in the intersection of history, tradition, and sacred obligation? Is it a function of passing on her values to the future? If it is, what are those values?

Quoting a New York Times Magazine article, Hanan Alexander describes, “A new breed of worshiper is looking beyond the religious institution for a do-it-yourself religion ... The religious institutions that used to deliver orthodox practice to the unquestioning masses are under challenge—not just by smaller institutions but by individuals who want to reshape religion for themselves. God is being decentralized ...

More and more” (Alexander, 2002, p. xiv). Eve fits this contemporary image. She has been energized by the independence and freedom to make personal meaning of the sacred literature that the non-Orthodox synagogue encourages. She may have continued that exploration on her own, but I believe her experience in the classroom gave her the impetus to continue on that journey. What does the preparation to teach sacred text do to enhance or detract from a teacher’s appreciation of those writings? What is the experience of sharing that journey with a group of pre-adolescents? Alexander (2002) goes on to observe, “Education is both process and product” (p. xvi). I would contend that the teacher’s spiritual quest, in this case, Eve’s, is conflated into the process of facilitating her students’ encounter with the sacred text.

Eve’s success enables her students to participate in the spiritual life of her synagogue community. She describes her earlier years as being “a 1960s hippie ... politically active ... anti-war ... liberal.” I wonder how often synagogue-school students meet up with teachers shaped by that persona. It is not a rare experience to hear Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young’s version of “Teach Your Children” (Nash, 1970, track 2) used as a set induction for the *V’Ahavta*.

You, who are on the road,
must have a code that you can live by.
And so, become yourself,
Because the past is just a good bye.
Teach, your children well ...
And feed them on your dreams ...

Crosby, Stills, and Nash performed this song at Woodstock, a milestone event that for many baby boomers represents the harmonious community toward which their generation wanted to refashion American society. It is no accident that even in the absence of a centralized curriculum planning body, this song and its echoes in the *Torah*

are so frequently connected. Establishing that connection is also a part of the effort to demonstrate that this prayer, and Jewish ethics and values are frequently reflected in American culture. Alexander (2002), commenting on contemporary education, writes of

a realignment in educational, ethical and religious thought from value-free analysis of individuals and their rights toward passionate engagement with communities envisaging the good. Rather than dichotomizing “feelings” and “reasons,” as has been so common in modern thought, this trend synthesizes religiosity—passionate devotion to higher ideals—with intelligence. Ideals are not only fostered within religious institutions but also by cultural endeavors, such as art, literature, music or politics. These too can be pursued with “religiosity” in the sense in which I am using the term. (p. xii)

Is this sentiment reflected in Eve’s experience and that of other synagogue-school teachers? Do they regard the text that is the content of their instruction as a map back to the Woodstock Nation, or picking up a trail that seems to have dead-ended, a guide toward liberal values, political activism and peace activism—Alexander’s “higher ideals?”

This chapter is devoted to exploring the lived experience of teaching Jewish sacred literature, as it builds on Chapter One. I look to the creative arts, poetry, literature, music, and film to see how teachers are portrayed in our society and explore the literature on Jewish education for ways in which the sacred is addressed. I reconsider my experiences in this endeavor and those of colleagues for their potential to gain understanding of what it means to teach sacred literature in a synagogue-school. While there are references to teaching the Bible, rituals, and prayer to children dating to the fifth century BCE, Jewish education in America has developed into a unique cultural phenomenon in comparison to any period in Jewish history, as well as to virtually any contemporary Jewish community in the world. As a result, this study is largely a voyage into uncharted territory.

Just Who Is This Person Teaching My Child?

Most people have a sense of who teaches their child in a public school. Standardized testing, rigid curriculum structures, and the degree to which teachers are held accountable to quantifiable expectations have gone a long way toward bringing this about. A bachelor's degree in the area of specialization, and credentials that qualify for the local teaching certificate, are generally the base line. That there is the sense of teaching being a career path also enters into the picture. In the world of synagogue-school teachers, there is almost nothing approximating this well-charted course. Content knowledge ranges from scholarly to being barely one chapter ahead of the children. Pedagogic preparation ranges from none to all levels of academic education, to skills in an allied field. This later qualification, particularly, is widely defined. "A salesman sells ideas," "a lawyer makes their case," and "a social worker deals with organizing communities" are stand-ins for formal teaching credentials I have heard tossed around among principals. While synagogues are almost all well defined along denominational lines, the synagogue-school faculty roster typically ranges from traditional to atheistic in degrees of faith and observance. What influence does this eclecticism have on the collegiality of teachers of Jewish sacred literature? How is it manifest in the field?

To all of my colleagues in this educational endeavor, the knowledge base that could be construed as core knowledge is so amorphous as to be somewhat beyond definition. While one teacher's grasp of history can be a primary consideration for hiring, another is esteemed for skill with Hebrew text, while yet another is prized for socially conscious activism. In contemplating these differences, I visualize the teachers who would be extraordinarily animated in explaining the shifting boundaries of Israel's map

over the centuries, or another energized by the subtleties of language in a prayer, and still another by the potential the artistic experience of designing candlesticks for Shabbat offers. For one of my colleagues it is the musical route that invigorates his Judaism:

It is fantastic. This piece of music was written in 14th century Italy. It is a very difficult arrangement. Then the choir brings it to life. A liturgical selection from the *Tanakh*, a medieval musical arrangement and here we are singing it. It is a real sense of accomplishment. (Barry)

It is the choral community that is the vehicle carrying Barry, a Washington, DC area Jewish educator, to his deepest connections to the sacred tradition. Sheet music is his road map. Barry has found what a hiker could describe as a trail heading, an entry point for beginning or resuming a hike. I already have noted other potential trail headings, crafts, biography, geography, and the primary documents of Jewish tradition themselves. Indeed, are these trail headings for teachers marking the paths they have found toward their deeper spirituality? Are they routes that will bring their students toward a greater understanding of the sacred or an understanding that there are many paths to God?

It is the metaphor of a journey that provides a counterpoint to this narrative. The sense of leaving home, braving the unpredictable, the uncertainty of the voyage—all have been a part of Jewish life from its earliest ancient narratives.

Lech Lecha—Go Forth

Out of 54 *parshioat* (portions) of the *Torah* the first two, in reality, precede what came to be the Jewish people. It is in the third *parsha* that we are introduced to the patriarchal father, Abram, who comes to the understanding that there is one God and is told by *El Shaddai*, “Go forth to a land that I will show you.” The narrative advances with a trek westward from Mesopotamia to Canaan. In a few spare verses, the origin of

the Jewish people begins to unfold. That beginning is a journey that, as the Chinese aphorism goes, “begins with one step.”

For my students, I want that first step, and every subsequent step, to be as adventurous as I imagine Abraham’s journey across the desert must have been. It can be an adventure of the mind as much as anything, but the ancient wisdom resides in the body as well and allows a listening within. One of the nexus for me to draw people into a love and appreciation for Judaism’s sacred writings is through prayer services.

We have just broken a moment of silence segueing into an ancient song of peace in our ancestral language, Hebrew. I tell everyone, “You may close your *Mahzor* (High Holy Days prayer book). Then with an element of drama, I turn my back on the roomful of people and begin to go through my bag. I can tell that about 80 pairs of eyes are watching my every move. I pull the old tan army blanket with the hole cut in the middle over my head. This will serve as a desert traveler’s robe. I put the convention name tag in place, “HELLO MY NAME IS Jonah.” I pull the elastic to the fake beard over the back of my head and nudge the whiskers into place. I then put on the exotic, Bukharan *kippah* (skullcap) and turn to my audience, the gesture a wordless “ta-daaa.” There are chuckles from various parts of the room. “Good morning. I am Jonah. (I begin passing out play business cards “Jonah—Prophet of Israel.”) You may have read about me. My story appears in the Bible and for over a thousand years the Jewish people have been reading my story on this day, Yom Kippur. Let me tell you how it really was” and I carry on a first person narrative of the ancient tale. At the conclusion of my telling I ask, “What do you make of this story?” A student raises his hand, “It means when God tells you to do something, you better do it.” Another says, “It means if you see you’ve done wrong you can promise to start being good and God will forgive you.” One of the boys who has been fully engaged in the service adds, “It means you have to face up to what you have done wrong.” In my own mind I am thinking, great, they got the point of the story. I thank everyone for their insights and move on to the conclusion of the service. (My reflections)

On this day, *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the center of Jewish religious life is the synagogue sanctuary. This tenth day of the seventh month is considered to be the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. Even Jews who do not participate in a daily *minyan* (prayer quorum) or *Shabbat* service the rest of the year, make every effort to find themselves in synagogue on this Autumn day. Parents who normally drive up to the building’s doorstep

and drop off their children without touching foot to synagogue property join their progeny on this day. Sandy Koufax, Hall of Fame baseball player, as non-observant a Jew as can be imagined, famously chose not to pitch the opening game of the 1965 world series because the penultimate moment of the baseball season came on this 10th day of *Tishrei*. What is it about *Yom Kippur* that inspires people to a heightened level of observance? What compels even the non-*shul* goers to make their way to the synagogue? What voice tells people to seek meaning in this day? This is an occasion when my identity as spiritual guide is most clear. It is when my role of teacher of sacred text is most publicly displayed and the day when more people are attuned to the messages in that literature.

Baruchim HaBaim—Welcome to my Classroom

In a frequently referenced *Talmudic* anecdote,

It happened that a certain heathen came before Shamaï and said to him, “Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole *Torah* while I stand on one foot.” Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder’s cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: That is the whole *Torah*, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it.” (*Talmud, Shabbat* 31a, Soncino)

It is Hillel and Shamaï who can be called the prototypes for the concept of opposing “schools of thought.” Interpreting *Torah*, these two great rabbis regularly take opposing views. Shamaï is typically portrayed as the demanding, scholarly headmaster of what is referred to as the school of Shamaï. Hillel is presented as the patient, mild, more lenient interpreter of sacred text, and leader of the school of Hillel. The anecdote cited above illustrates Shamaï’s attitude, that learning the whole of *Torah* would be an enormous undertaking. His dismissiveness is born of his lifelong dedication to the study of sacred text and a reverence for those verses. He sees vast well-charted terrain. An

exploration with him would mean, in effect, to study the details of every rock, tree, or creature that presented itself along the way. Hillel is an altogether different teacher. To journey with him is to start with the big picture. He takes you to the top of the mountain. With Hillel you go straight to the point and from there begin to deconstruct the details that support his position. As a guide, Hillel brings you to the most accessible point for the journey to begin. What is the nature of the student attracted to the school of Shamai? Who would choose to become a disciple of Hillel?

The documented evolution of approaches to text and study precedes Hillel and Shamai. They are considered to be the last of the *zugot* (pairs), which began in the second century BCE. The case can be made that based on the *Torah* verse, “You are a stiff necked people” (*Torah, Shemot* 33:3); differences of opinion, politicking, debate, and a certain degree of tolerance reflect an even more ancient vintage. Perhaps this dynamic is a product of the constantly changing environment in which Jewish communities encamp. Hillel left a wealthy family in Babylon to come to Jerusalem. In the span of a few generations of his family, the holy city went from being under Assyrian domination, to Jewish independence to Roman domination. Cartography would have provided steady work. What influence do the cultural and political environments have on teachers of Jewish sacred text? What life experience shaped the approaches of these two men? How would that be manifest in a synagogue-school teacher today?

A recent effort, “The Visions Project,” explored Jewish education in the last decade of 20th century America (Fox, Scheffler, & Marom, 2003, pp.15-16). The scholars who were brought together for the project were

diverse in their Jewish commitments (from stringently Orthodox to Israeli secular) and in their subject expertise (Bible, *Talmud*, Jewish philosophy, Jewish history,

the arts, Israel and the Holocaust). They also varied in their academic specialties: research on Jewish education, teacher training and leadership training, educational administration and curriculum design. Finally they varied in their developmental focus (young children, adolescents, and adults) and the settings in which they worked (both formal and informal). (p. 16)

This reflects the climate in which synagogue-school teachers operate and the forces that push and pull as they chart a path for their students. Similarly, they bring to the classroom a diversity of Jewish commitments. “Visions” recognized challenges posed by contemporary society that had never been a factor in sustaining Jewish community.

Every feature of the premodern context has been destroyed or rendered problematic in the modern period. The emancipation and entry of the Jew into the mainstream of Western life broke the tightly knit harmony of home, school and community. The general breakdown of the medieval worldview shattered the inherited conception of nature and history shared by Jew and non-Jew alike, undermined traditional attitudes to their religious Scriptures, and destroyed the uniform traditional response to Jewish existence which constituted the basis of education in the past. (Fox et al., 2003, p. 6)

On a map, this could be regarded as a crossroads. One direction continues this general breakdown, while another leads toward isolation away from these forces, and still another seeks a fusion of the two. Will this middle course lead to a dead end? How rough a path will it prove to be? This project observed that, “Large segments of the Jewish population have been alienated from traditional Jewish learning and its values” (Fox et al., 2003, p. 7). When I look at a Sunday morning classroom and see students in little league baseball and soccer uniforms I recognize the tension between the sacred space of the synagogue-school classroom and the lure of the athletic field. Ironically, this is the argument that raged in the period of the first of the *zugot*, Greek Hellenism vs. *Hasidism* (a term that only in name connects to the current community of Jews identified under the same banner). What is the teacher’s awareness of playing a role in bridging or widening the gap between alienation from Jewish life and embracing participation in that community?

The debate is ongoing as to whose approach to Jewish learning would best address the community's recognition of Jewish "alienation," a liberal tradition in the spirit of Hillel, or a strict interpretive stance as represented by Shamai. On a constant basis, today's teachers are challenged to, at least in their hearts, take a stand on this debate.

Well, What Do You Know?

If "knowledge is power," as Thomas Jefferson said, I attribute the respect most professionals are afforded to the perception of their mastery of specialized, hidden, perhaps mystical, knowledge. A doctor can mesmerizingly demonstrate skill through uncannily diagnosing an illness. Lawyers seemingly pull out from between the folds the unseen case winning precedent, a legal loophole or the magic words that make a contract binding. These are professions defined by perpetually evolving empirical medical science and well-reasoned judicial process, respectively. The hidden knowledge held by the teacher of sacred literature has a different source. To some it is a deep reservoir, a vast surface reflecting sky, rippling with a breeze, its depths as shrouded as the road to antiquity, a distance spanned by immeasurable time. To others the teacher's knowledge is from a metaphysical plane, a gap spanning to an unknown dimension. What is it to be the master of Jewish sacred text? Is its pinnacle to be a guide? Is it defined by the experience of leading the exploration to discover spiritual, ethical, and moral insight from the religious culture that began with the biblical Abram's encounter with what he understood as one almighty unifying force in the universe? Who are the sources of inspiration? Are they respected contemporaries, ancient heroes, or the nameless figures who conducted these teachings through the centuries?

There are days when I have a difficult time keeping my eyes open. I yawn at my desk and can't focus on my work. There is no salvation in a second or third cup of

coffee. Every interruption sends me into a deeper state of exhaustion. Class is about to begin and I scoop up my materials. I head down the hall to my classroom. Greeting the first students I see, the fatigue vanishes, disappears from consciousness. The lesson begins with a burst of energy that is sustained through the next four hours of teaching. Even then I am too full of energy. I am usually the last one out of the classroom, the last one to leave the building. (My reflections)

What is the source of my energy when operating in this arena? Is it related to the environment, the students, the material, or some combination thereof? I suspect part of it has to do with my own particular vision for Jewish education. The opportunity for an encounter with students, either planned like the class I am responsible for, or the spontaneous circumstance of a teacher running late, provide possibilities for movement from the curricular objective I had a hand in writing to conducting the lesson intended toward reaching that goal. My energy also is born of a certain despair. As Isidore Twersky (2003) relates:

It is necessary to point out here that Judaism is in the midst of an historical crisis. As religion and secularity wrestle with each other, ignorance of Judaism presides over the confrontation. The element common to the process of secularization, which developed out of various eighteenth-century ideologies, is a reservation about the lifestyle and value system of traditional society ... The process of disengagement and estrangement from Judaism persists with great force. We are becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that if we do not find a way to become attached again to the tradition and its values, if we do not succeed in helping the tradition speak in a manner that enables us to hear and absorb its meaning and echoes—its religious-spiritual message—then we will find ourselves caught in a terrible historical predicament. (as cited in Fox, et al., 2003, p. 48)

The opportunity to respond directly to this situation is perhaps the most energizing factor in my teaching. It is acting on a larger teaching goal that goes beyond an immediate learning objective. Just as negotiating a difficult series of rapids in a canoe is enough to pump up the adrenaline level in anticipation of the next challenge, the experience of

opposing the force of “disengagement and estrangement,” as Twersky puts it, is a powerfully invigorating experience. It is very much like confronting a force of nature.

Just how Stiff Necked Can You Be?

Walking the halls of my synagogue-school one is aware that this year marks 350 years of Jewish life in America. Posters proclaim Jewish contributions to politics, art, science, entertainment and literature. Similar posters grace the walls in many synagogues I visit. In my tour of the Jewish museum in Stockholm, I saw a similar theme played out, the narrative of this ethnic group’s origins in the country and historic contributions to the society. Journeying is an ever-present part of Jewish history and Jewish life. It can be interpreted as both blessing and curse, welcome and unwelcome. The word refers to “travel or passage from one place to another” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*). As a teacher I hope, in so many ways, to take my students on a journey, from the present to the past, from their lifeworld to that of their ancestors, from a selfish, materialistic society toward a more selfless, altruistic vision.

It was in 1654 that the Jewish community of Recife, Brazil fled that country when the Spanish Inquisition, from which their ancestors had taken refuge a century and a half earlier, came to the new world. As Howard Sachar describes it,

Recife’s fugitive Jews, cramped and ill in the fetid holds of the tiny vessel *St. Charles*, audaciously ventured north, beyond the blue waters of the Caribbean and into the slate-gray Atlantic. Early in September their anxious search was rewarded: Manhattan Island lay before their bowsprit ... (Sachar, 1990, p. 161)

The safe haven they found was the Dutch settlement, New Amsterdam. These were not the first Jews in North America. Individuals had been coming to this hemisphere since Columbus’ voyage in 1492. The fundamental difference was that this group of 23 men, women and children, represented the beginning of Jewish community in what just over a

century later became the United States of America. It is at this point that the Jewish journey through history took a dramatic turn. Following the dead end that Spain became and the closed avenue that Brazil was transformed into, North America, New Amsterdam at least, had all conceivable possibilities.

Community, conceptually has its word origins in Latin, *communitatem*, from *communis* or common (*Oxford English Dictionary [OED]*, 1991, v. 3, pp. 581-582). Its meaning implies fellowship, a sense of unity based on relations or feelings. The meanings that best apply to its context in Jewish life are the sense of common character or identity. It is further described as “life in association with others” (*OED*, 1991, p. 581) and “the body of those having common or equal rights or rank” (*OED*, 1991, p. 582). Another definition is “a body of people organized into a political, municipal or social unity” (*OED*, 1991, p. 582). These frames of reference well define the nature of Jewish community or the sub-communities which develop such as synagogues and their occasional breakaway congregations. All in all these terms and the reality of them in practice reveal that sustaining Jewish life is not an individual enterprise. A common Yiddish expression is “a Jew is never alone.” As this chapter progresses, the prescience of these definitions echo ever more loudly.

Pack Your Bags

One exercise that is virtually in the canon of synagogue-school education is the challenge to list the ten items you would pack in your Jewish suitcase if you were going off on a journey to where you could not acquire these items, but wanted to sustain Jewish life. Typically the scenario either establishes a colony in unsettled territory or out in deep space. The task almost invariably encourages energetic debate as to what are the most

fundamental, basic, or irreplaceable ritual objects. Students will argue, “I would bring a *Torah* scroll because that is where all of our laws come from.” Another will include on the list a “*siddur* because you have to have services.” This exercise gives us a good sense of what the children have come to value in Jewish life. That they typically include texts of sacred literature indicates the power of the literary tradition and their understanding of the significance of sacred text.

As a literal, physical object a suitcase carries many meanings. Packing your bags means leaving, going away, and opening up the possibilities of change. Returning is not an assumed meaning. The trunk my grandfather brought from Poland in the first decades of the twentieth century was never intended to bring him back to Europe. That it has probably long ago decayed into fragments in a Philadelphia dump attests to the permanence of his settlement on this side of the Atlantic. Furthermore, that the one I packed in the last decades of the twentieth century in a move to Israel contained nothing that could be described as ritual objects speaks to the associations I had with Jewish life, or the absence of religious observance as a part of it.

Unloading Baggage

A colloquialism that has made its way into our language is “baggage.” The figurative baggage we bring to our relationships is the assembled experiences that have made us the individuals into whom we have developed. Sartre (1943/1956) describes people as in a constant state of evolution, of being and non-being. The baggage we carry echoes that view. It is the resource that enables us to experience the world, giving us access to summits that are difficult to reach, sustaining us through the tightest spaces, and

providing the tools for examining what one finds along the way. The uniqueness of individual experience leads to the unpredictable responses to human interaction.

An email query from a colleague asked, “I am writing a *d’var Torah* and am looking for a textual reference to teeth. Does anyone have a source to recommend?” A few moments after reading that, one of our fifth grade teachers, Marla, stops by my office. I ask her if she can recall a source referring to teeth. In a heartbeat, her face bursts into a radiant smile, “*V’Shinantam L’Vanecha*,” she declares triumphantly. The verse is usually translated as “and you shall teach these words to your children.” At first I did not make the connection. Marla went on to explain to me, the root meaning of *V’Shinantam* is *shin*, the Hebrew word for tooth. The phrase very elegantly spans at least 3,000 years to the contemporary concept of chewing over an idea. I immediately tell Marla that she is a genius which she deflects telling me it was a lesson she learned from her rabbi. (My reflections)

Marla unpacked a lot of baggage in that exchange. It was not a burden and did not lighten her load. A rabbinic quote says that no one comes up short in the exchange of knowledge. What she unpacked was her love of learning, an attitude toward her teachers, and the pleasure of sharing a teaching. I have had the opportunity to sit in on Marla’s classes, and her joy at being able to enlighten me has played out repeatedly in response to the many questions inquisitive students proffer. I have seen a great deal of pedagogic literature devoted to the subject of teacher-generated questions. Here we have turned the tables. What does the opportunity to respond to a student’s question mean to a teacher?

Unpacking Baggage

Baggage certainly has its less positive connotations. Sometimes it is woven into people’s unexpected responses. Other times, it is past experience that becomes an obstacle to overcome. The concrete and the symbolic meet when baggage becomes a museum exhibit. At Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp in Poland, one exhibit is a towering stack of suitcases belonging to deportees who breathed their last breaths in that abominable place. Similarly, Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust memorial museum, and the

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum feature suitcases in their telling of the Nazi program for the extermination of European Jewry. *Hana's Suitcase*, a children's book and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary, reveals what can be learned in the process of unpacking even an empty piece of baggage:

In a small nondescript building in downtown Tokyo, the children—flocks of—come to see a suitcase, sitting in a glass case. They write poems about it, and draw pictures. They are drawn to the story it tells, and the tragedy it represents.

The owner of the suitcase was Hana Brady. She was born in Nove Mesto, Czechoslovakia in 1931, deported to Theresienstadt in 1942, and died at Auschwitz in 1944. She was 13.

The Tokyo Holocaust Education and Resource Center acquired the suitcase last year. No further information about Hana came with it. Since then its director, Fumiko Ishioka, has made it her mission to find out more of Hana's story and scoured the world for it. In the end, her search brought her to Toronto and George Brady.

George Brady is Hana's older brother, the only member of their immediate family to survive. For him, the reappearance of the suitcase in Japan—57 years after Hana's death—was absolutely astonishing.
(*Hana's Suitcase*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Retrieved July 20, 2008 from <http://www.cbc.ca/thesundayedition/features/hanassuitcase/>)

This is perhaps the epitome of what can be unpacked from a well-chosen display piece. Nazi regulations, which often reduced a person's material possessions to what could be contained in a single bag, could not limit the expansive meaning of even long empty bags. A skillful educator unpacked that suitcase and multiple meanings poured from it. It was a mute text brought to life. Teaching is elevated to high art in those moments. What is it like to live those experiences? What is it like to discover the material around which a learning experience is created and be partner to the intersection between learner and content?

Baggage of Hope

As polar opposites to Hana's suitcase are the trunks, bags, and baskets on display at Ellis Island, America's gateway for almost 12 million immigrants. There, today's visitors are greeted by the exhibition space with containers that conveyed the material goods of journeyers who ventured to these shores in search of a better life than they or their families had known in Europe. Ellis Island represents our highest aspirations as a nation open to the benefits of immigrants. It tells the story of an America that mostly has welcomed foreigners, turning away a small percentage, and mostly on the basis of illness. While over a million Jews passed through those gates, virtually unencumbered, to make this land their home, our welcome in this piece of geography has not always been red carpet treatment. In fact, it was an auspicious beginning.

In 1654, the colonial governor, Peter Stuyvesant, wanted these "repugnant," "indigen(t)," "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ" to be "require(d) in a friendly way to depart" from New Amsterdam (Eban, 1984, pp. 299-301). Reading the exchanges between, Stuyvesant, the Recife refugees, and the Dutch West India Company that essentially owned the settlement, I imagine the uncertainty and indignation those exiles must have felt. How many teachers' passions are aroused by a history of having to fight to exist as Jews? The tension between the greater society's call to assimilate and the huddled circle holding on to the sacred traditions they had received from their parents who had received them from their ancestors and back, through time, to a Middle Eastern desert tribe seems to have played itself out repeatedly over the course of thousands of years of Jewish history. How does that tension play out in the process of teaching Jewish sacred literature?

Running parallel to this well worn plot of settling, developing a community, uprooting the group, and resettling the population elsewhere, are sacred texts that at one level provide the impetus for the people to remain committed to the core values. At another level, they are a narrative that illustrates the experience as a recurring event, and at yet another level they are a story line demonstrating that the troubles will lead to a flourishing of the community. “A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” (*Torah, Shemot* 1:8) and Egypt soured. “By the rivers of Babylon we wept,” would indicate that the lands of the Tigris and Euphrates were less than ideal (*Tanakh, Thilim* [Psalms] 137:1, JPS). The account is related in the *Tanakh* of

orders ... issued in the name of King Ahasuerous and sealed with the king’s signet. Accordingly, written instructions were dispatched by couriers to all the king’s provinces to destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women, on a single day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month. (*Tanakh, Esther* 3:12-13)

Although it did not play out that way, this episode, re-read every year on the Festival of *Purim*, points to the existential dangers that always, potentially, lurk around the next corner. A connection to this history, makes sense of Vladek Spiegelman’s explanation to his son Artie in *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* on how to make a secret hiding place:

Yes, we had in Srodula to make for ourselves “bunkers,” places to hide ... I can explain you ... such things it’s good to know exactly how was it—just in case. (Spiegelman, 1986, p. 110)

Vladek experienced the Nazi occupation of Poland and knew the hostility toward Jews in that country. His American born son, Artie, can’t relate to recent or distant history. What connection does the teacher want to facilitate of the present to the past? What is the experience of hearing the connections students make of history to contemporary experience? Do we want “Just in case” to be a part of our children’s thinking?

In trying to put myself among those refugees on the St. Charles, I wonder if they turned to their sacred texts, contemplated that they were following a well worn path and that they would be planting a Jewish flag, metaphorically, that 350 years later would be commemorated in Jewish communities from America's east to west coasts. That is the mystery of the journey. An explorer hopes to discover something that will reshape the way people experience the world. What must it have been like for this pioneer group, establishing Jewish community in this region of the new world? What could it have been like for them to reconnect to their sacred texts and traditions in their new home in a somewhat vacant landscape? What must the experience have been like to teach that text to their children, fulfilling the commandment to "teach these words to your children?" (*Torah, Devarim 6:7*). With this fragile toehold in a new land, a new community was established. The Jewish people's journey through history opened a radically new chapter in a land that would redefine the meaning of civilization. The people for whom sacred texts instructed, "God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (*Torah, Bereshit 1:27*) became a part of a citizenry that in its opening chapter declared, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (Declaration of Independence). These texts would find common ground in the inscription on the Liberty Bell, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land and unto all its inhabitants thereof" (*Torah, Vayikra 25:10*).

Will It Be Time to Pack Our Bags?

Throughout history changes in government have attracted the attention of the Jewish community. I referred earlier to the ascension of a new Egyptian pharaoh related in the *Torah* that ushered in the period of slavery in that country. That episode was only a precursor for Jewish life in the middle ages. Throughout that time, in Europe, new monarchs alternatively expelled and opened their borders to Jewish settlement, protected or abandoned their Jewish inhabitants. Following the American revolution, a sacred document of another sort was drafted. In keeping with European tradition, a delegation from the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island drafted a letter to the new president, George Washington. The letter, referring to themselves as “the children of the stock of Abraham,” essentially asked, “Where will we fit into this new republic?” The response they received, modestly signed “G. Washington,” states:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for giving to Mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens ... May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. (Mendes-Flohr & Reinharz, 1980, pp. 362-3)

How has the welcome offered by George Washington defined American Jewish life?

How have the principles under which America’s founding fathers established this democracy, influenced the encounter with Jewish sacred text? This message certainly was a signal that life in the United States would be different than anything ever experienced in Jewish history. By invoking words pulled straight from *Torah*, President Washington

communicated as empathetically as was humanly possible that the Jews of Newport would be operating under a new set of principles, ones that granted full equality in the emerging democracy.

It Takes A Village

God (then) said, “The outcry against Sodom is so great, and their sin is so very grave ...” Abraham was still standing before God. He came forward and said, “Will you actually wipe out the innocent together with the guilty? Suppose there are fifty innocent people in the city. Would you still destroy it and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty good people inside it? It would be sacrilege even to ascribe such an act to You—to kill the innocent with the guilty, letting the righteous and the wicked fare alike. It would be sacrilege to ascribe this to You! Shall the whole world’s Judge not act justly?” God said, “If I find fifty innocent people in Sodom, I will spare the entire area for their sake.” Abraham spoke up and said, “I have already said too much before my Lord! I am mere dust and ashes! But suppose that there are five missing from the fifty innocent? Will you destroy the entire city because of the five?” “I will not destroy it, if I find forty-five there,” replied God. [Abraham] persisted and said, “Suppose there are forty there?” “I will not act for the sake of the forty.” “Let not my Lord be angry, but I must speak up. What if there are thirty there?” “I will not act if I find thirty there.” “I have already spoken too much now before my Lord! But what if twenty are found there?” “I will not destroy for the sake of the twenty.” “Let my Lord not become angry, but I will speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there?” “I will not destroy for the sake of the ten.” When He finished speaking with Abraham, God left [him]. Abraham then returned home. (*Torah, Bereshit 18:20-33*)

Judaism is about community. In the story of Abraham arguing with God over the impending destruction of Sodom a question is posed, why does Abraham fight for individual lives, fifty, forty, thirty finally stopping at ten. A lesson found in Rabbinic sources is that at least 10 people are needed to sustain a society. Another verse from the tradition instructs, “Do not separate yourself from the community” (*Mishna, Pirke Avot*, 2:4). The interpersonal closeness that Judaism demands, commands effective communication. Emmanuel Levinas likely experienced that sense of community first hand in his Lithuanian Jewish childhood. He comments on “that famous love of one’s

neighbor” pointing to the “impossibility” of living in isolation (Levinas (1995/1999, pp. 163-4). Levinas (1947/1978) also understands how exhausting the experience of community can be. “There is a pain in Being,” he writes (p. 23). Gadamer (1960/1999) describes true conversation as, “Each person opens himself to the other ... accepts his point of view as valid ... understands what he says” (p. 385). I know many people who would chuckle over that concept. There is a Yiddish expression that my first hand experience would attest to, “Two Jews, three opinions.” Nonetheless, the benefits of the give and take of dialogue were expressed about 2,000 years ago and recorded in the *Talmud*, “Just as a small piece of wood sets light to a large piece, so too do younger *Torah* scholars sharpen the older ones” (*Taanit* 7a, Steinsaltz). As I endeavor to impose this standard on my teaching I find the exchange uplifting. Where do synagogue-school teachers put the ethical dimensions of Jewish tradition in their pedagogy? Is ethics flaunted like Joseph’s cloak of many colors? Is it cast aside like an impediment to real teaching? Does such a teacher ask, “Am I my (tradition’s principles) keeper?”

A Time To Every Purpose Under Heaven

Being Jewish in America has long imposed challenges previous generations did not experience. Among those challenges is the one of negotiating the balance between demands of the greater American society and that of Jewish community. As it is we are said to be an over scheduled, sleep deprived society. How much energy can students bring to their Jewish studies after a full day of secular school? I see two girls dropped off at our building twice a week from their school bus at about 3:15, an hour before our classes begin, finding a quiet spot to get a start on homework. What is the challenge of holding a student’s attention when an hour or more of assignments are on that child’s

consciousness? More typically it is a parent or an *au pair* making the drop-off for our 4:15 start time, barely negotiating the span between the 3:30 or 3:45 end to the elementary school day. There are few alternative routes around the less than optimal time frame in which we operate. Children eat an after school snack in the rushed moments between getting off the school bus and joining the carpool to the synagogue. Many of our students put off beginning hours of homework until after 7:00 in order to be a part of our classes. Teachers leave their children with a babysitter or home alone. I have had faculty members who spent their workday teaching in one school, then making their way to the synagogue to give instruction for another two hours. Parents become clock watchers making sure they can clear their desks, negotiate rush hour traffic and get their children to class on time or to be on time for pick up at the end of the two-hour lesson. All partners to this project endure all variety of disruptions to make the engagement with sacred text possible. I like to believe these are signs of students, parents and teachers identifying our enterprise as worth going out of their way to support. What does it mean to negotiate these impediments? How does this series of circumstances shape relationships between the players? What conclusions are arrived at that call this a priority?

Show Me How It's Done

Leading the Yom Kippur service has become one of the longest running commitments in my professional life. Rabbi Bruce Kahn first introduced the holiday service, at a teachable moment, to me. I was principal of the synagogue-school. With holiday programs, my responsibilities were administrative and well out of the public view. Like a dockworker preparing a ship for departure, my responsibilities were to make sure the crew was present, the handful of teenagers who were assigned roles in the

service; that the passengers, the congregation, were invited, present, and energized with anticipation; and that the required equipment, prayer books, were in their proper place. This spiritual voyage began with a song bringing the sanctuary full of children, parents and grandparents into harmonious unity. For three years it was always a magical experience to observe and with which to be a participant. A gift of Rabbi Kahn's was attaching deep meaning to symbolic acts or objects. At *B'nei Mitzvah* celebrations he would talk about our Holocaust *Torah*. I never tired of hearing him say, "This *Torah* originally belonged to a Czechoslovakian congregation which was destroyed by the Nazis. Laurie (or whichever child it was) reading from it is a testament to the enduring spirit of the Jewish people." He encouraged me to bring hundreds of students to the Soviet Embassy to demonstrate for open emigration policies from that country and further encouraged me to demonstrate at the gates of that embassy, an illegal act, according to a 1930s period law protecting the German embassy, for which I would surely be arrested, which I was, and witnessed by over 100 of my students.

The time came to continue my professional journey. I left Rabbi Kahn and his synagogue to become principal of a synagogue-school in Northern Virginia. As fate would have it, one of my first assignments was to organize children's services for the High Holy Days, *Rosh HaShanna* and *Yom Kippur*. I knew that these services were rich in potential and an exceptional opportunity to introduce myself to the school population. I had a ready-made model for developing my program. Three years of watching Rabbi Kahn with the children on those holy days, *Shabbat*, and other holidays gave me an image to emulate. I wanted the high holiday experience to be a memorable exploration of three principles of Jewish life: study, prayer and deeds of loving kindness. Who is the

person who can bring this kind of inspiration to the teaching environment? What is the source of such inspiration? What power is manifest in the sanctity of the material around which the teaching is built?

My Turn to Lead

What behavior is inspired by the experience of sacred literature? What is the meaning of spiritual guidance? What inspires the inspirer? My *Rosh HaShanna* program began with a children's service. In the effort to create an atmosphere of spiritual energy, I followed the Rabbi Kahn rules of order:

I meet with the teenagers, the elder statesmen of the synagogue-school, in my office, reviewing their roles in the service. Over 100 children wait down the hall, kindergartners through seventh graders. A parent hushes the room to silence and I enter the sanctuary in my best suit, a *tallit* (prayer shawl) draped about my shoulders, a *kippah* clipped on securely, and trailed by my adolescent entourage. Ascending the *bema* (stage) I step up to the podium. Looking out at the crowd, I bellow from the bottom of my guts, "*Shannah Tovah* (Happy New Year) Everybody! I'll tell you what brings us here today, the first of *Tishrei*, the one, but not only, Jewish New Year. Let me hear from you—*Shannah Tovah*." (My reflections)

We opened the formalities of the service with a familiar hymn bringing the assembly to a greater degree of unity. As the rituals unfolded, songs, stories, and sacred liturgy were introduced or followed up with questions, comments, and input drawn from the congregation. At one point the discussion turned to celebrating God and God's presence on earth. At another, the challenge was to be the best person we can be, not just better than anyone else. Later, we chanted Hebrew verses known to have been recited on this calendar date by our ancestors in Solomon's Temple over 2,000 years ago.

I see the educator's challenge in terms exemplified by Husserl who is described as "a perpetual beginner" (Moran, 2000, p. 62). Children are the ultimate beginners. So much is new to them, the world they live in and their interaction with it. In their actions,

all too often I see a reliance on canned language, and marketed behaviors sold to them through the mass media. The “high five” looks scripted. The tantrum, no different from the one on a TV sitcom, is drawn out, ad nauseum. The flip comments inspired by a movie character and affectations are pulled from an MTV video.

My goal, as a synagogue-school teacher, is to move children from inauthentic being, to authentic being, from the frivolous to the profound and to dare challenge them to take the hard path, not the easy (Safransky, 1998). This means introducing a system of religious ethics and values and establishing them as a lens through which the world is seen. Is the high five, the tantrum, the flip comment or the affectation acceptable to the religiously sensitized?

Religious is defined as “imbued with religion; exhibiting the spiritual or practical effects of religion; pious, godly, god-fearing, devout” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1991, v. 13, p. 570). There is debate as to the origin of the term, but some relate it to the Latin *religare* conveying the idea of being restrained, tied back (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary, on line*). Accepting these terms I define my efforts as endeavoring to imbue children with a religious sensitivity that will effect behavior and guide their appreciation of the world. A discussion, such as one on the story of Jonah, brings up elements of regained self-control, holding back, the population of a city turning away from unrestrained, ungodly behavior to a path accepted by God so that a decree of divine punishment is withdrawn.

How does the leader convey the ancient message, give it meaning in the present and instigate its impact on future behavior? What is it like to draw in the learner to that discussion? When does the teacher know that the negotiation between animal instinct and

a higher spiritual plane has been bridged? Where does religious learning take place?

What is the connection between the sacred space of the synagogue and Jewish learning?

Religion also is defined as, “recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship ... personal or general acceptance of this feeling as a standard of spiritual and practical life” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1991, v. 13, p. 569). This phrasing is full of challenges. Does it in any way conform to a Jewish understanding of God and religion? Is it a view brought to or from the classroom by students or teachers? Does accepting this conception prevent exploration or acceptance of the Jewish God idea? Does God even have to play a role in the synagogue-school?

I can’t help but think that these are terms with which many of my students would define religion. A problem is, they are not necessarily Jewish conceptions, or certainly not non-Orthodox conceptions, of religion. For example, the *Torah* is explicit in saying that God does not “control (one’s) destiny.” This illustrates a great challenge to teaching Judaism in America. It is a society where athletes thank God for bringing victory to their team, and blockbuster films, popular television shows and almost every popular music group all convey acceptance or rejection, with varying degrees of subtlety, of Christian conceptions of religion. Community is our best evasive maneuver of this corrosive force. In the *Torah*, the Jewish people are told to build the *mishkan* (tent of assembly) “and I will dwell among them” (*Torah, Shemot* 25:8). The contemporary fulfillment of this commandment is to create Jewish communities, eventually establishing a “bricks and mortar” presence. Ever shifting social currents force us to evolve constantly while

remaining true to our bedrock principles. In this climate, our beginner status is cyclically re-certified.

The Synagogue as a Landscape

In *Getting Back Into Place* Edward S. Casey (1993) explores the garden as representative place:

In an embowered garden, I almost reside, yet I also walk about, practicing horticulture, and talk with people who reside in the manor house ... as I dwell on foot I also dwell in thought, as well as in history—and thus in language and value ... I dwell in multiple modes in several registers and on many levels. This leaves me on the edge of dwelling, just as gardens take me to the edge between built and natural places, or rather are that very edge. (p. 170)

A garden is, in Casey's terms, "built space" (p. 6). Even the most unyielding soil can be the source of horticultural splendor. This brings up images as ancient as the earliest Biblical narratives. The first picture that comes to mind is the Garden of Eden. But this is not the example we need. Following the Biblical narrative, that garden was created by God. Man and woman were placed on that stage like a 1930s studio contract actor placed on a movie set, well paid, but powerless as far as decision making was concerned. The better example comes a few verses later when Adam and Eve are kicked out of the garden, told they will have to pull their sustenance from an unyielding earth. Eden was an entrapping garden. It was like the gourd in the story of Jonah who was rebuked for lamenting the loss of the vegetable because, "you had nothing to do with it growing" (*Tanakh, Yonah* [Jonah] 4:10). On their own Adam and Eve had to till the soil; they had to work, had to strive, but their destiny was in their hands. What was meant to be punishment, banishment, was actually liberating. Their first post-Eden garden was an empowering garden.

On the first day of school I am in Eden. I bask in the knowledge students have accumulated in the past. Quickly, I begin to test the soil, plant seeds. Will they sprout? What nutrients will allow them to fulfill their greatest potential? Are my students enthusiastic learners, creative thinkers, cooperative and motivated? A section of the *Mishna, Pirke Avot*, has a lesson:

There are four types among those who study with the sages: the sponge, the funnel, the strainer, the sifter.
The sponge—absorbs everything.
The funnel—in one end and out the other.
The strainer—passes the wine, retains the dregs.
The sifter—removes the chaff, retains the groats. (*Pirke Avot* 5:17)

Studying the sacred calls the student to invest self in the exploration. From this verse we see that since antiquity, it was recognized that not all students are cast from the same mold. We also can see that there is an element of the sacred in all of them. Teachers, too, have a spark of the sacred in their being. The teacher, too, is descended from generations of instructors and participates in a tradition that is handed down from a generation of sages.

Sage derives from the Latin, *sapere*, to be wise. It is defined as eminent in wisdom, and connected to such terms as attach, prudence and good judgment (*Oxford English Dictionary Online*). Are my colleagues aware of these connections? Do they attend to the tradition they represent in the classroom?

Inspiring Landscapes

The holiday cycle has inspired the Jewish creative imagination for thousands of years. A Jewish-Italian Holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, left behind his pre-World War Two chemistry training to re-create himself as a writer. The poem below has found its way into several *Haggadot* (the text that is read at the Passover ritual meal):

Tell me: how is this night different
From all other nights?

Light the lamp, open the door wide
So the pilgrim can come in,
Gentile or Jew;
Under the rags perhaps the prophet is concealed.
Let him enter and sit down with us;
Let him listen, drink, sing and celebrate Passover ...
This is the night of differences ...

We will spend the night recounting
Far-off events full of wonder ...

Tonight they exchange questions:
The wise, the godless, the simple-minded and the child.
And time reverses its course,
Today flowing back into yesterday,
Like a river enclosed at its mouth.
Each of us has been a slave in Egypt,
Soaked straw and clay with sweat,
And crossed the sea dry-footed.
You too, stranger.
This year in fear and shame,
Next year in virtue and in justice. (Levi, 1982, p. 142)

In these verses, Levi conveys the most fundamental themes of the holiday, and Judaism in general. The poem is constructed around the stranger as welcome guest and potential prophet, a theme that runs through Jewish literary history. It refers to ritual foods, Jewish history, the relative nature of time, and the transformation from degradation to liberation. His last line, “Next year in virtue and justice” is a rephrasing of the traditional closing “Next year in Jerusalem,” a phrase as much a literal hope as a representational one. This poem evokes the message given life by the sages of the ultimate teachings of Judaism’s sacred texts, the commitment to virtuous behavior and the pursuit of justice. Levi himself is also a subject Parker Palmer would see as an opportunity for “good teaching” (Palmer, 1990, p. 11). In his terms, “Good teachers help students see the persons behind the ideas,

persons whose ideas often arose in response to some great suffering or hope that is with us still today” (p. 14). Jewish sacred texts are deeply layered in such characters. What is the extent to which they are brought to life in synagogue-school classrooms and a source of inspiration?

Sacred tradition informs this example of Levi’s writing. What is it like to see “under the rags” or behind the pen? What is it like to see prose emerge from a student, inspired by an exploration of sacred text? Assigning her students to write an essay on the meaning of prayer, a teacher receives affirmation of the influence of her lesson:

Prayer means different things to me. One, it connects me to G-d when I’m saying personal prayers. In a way, it is like talking to G-d, telling him/her what’s wrong, and it makes me feel good. I feel that he/she is really listening to me. Two, when I’m saying traditional prayers, it connects me to Jews around the world. It is nice to know that Jews around the world are singing, chanting and praying the same prayers, using the same melodies that we use. Last, but not least, prayer gives me joy. I feel joy all around me when my congregation is singing *Adon Olam*. I feel safe, belonging and joyous when we sing prayers like *Adon Olam*. Prayer means a lot to me. (Eliana)

This paragraph is an example of the writings our fourth graders turn in for this assignment every year. Some years I have to remind my teachers that the deadline for this work is fast approaching, probably as much as anything an indication of the tendency to try to fit in too much material into too little time. Other years I discover the work has been done with time to spare. Teachers often point out a few particularly inspiring essays. One teacher was so excited by her students’ essays that she wanted me to print them all in the synagogue newsletter. Parker Palmer (1990) writes to this kind of teaching experience:

More engaging ways of teaching will take root only as we explore more engaged images of knowing—especially “objective” knowing. Few of us want to throw out the Enlightenment baby with the objectivist bathwater. But we can no longer

teach as if there were a reality “out there” that can be mirrored by logical-empirical propositions. (p. 11)

The route Palmer proposes is to facilitate the students’ synthesizing content knowledge with making personal meaning. I would conclude that the prayer teacher’s enthusiasm for her student’s work that I mention above, is born of this approach and an encounter with the children’s “lifeworld,” to coin van Manen’s terminology (2003, p. 101). It is also an episode of leaping the boundary from “the objectivist strategy of keeping students outside the subject as observers and manipulators [over to] the microcosm approach bring[ing] them inside the subject as participants and co-creators of knowledge” (Palmer, 1990, p. 10). In this case, the teacher is redefining both “knowing,” and “cover[ing] the field” (Palmer, 1990, p. 10). Among the many dynamics of the classroom is the relationship between teacher and student and the potential for one to inspire the other. What does the content of instruction bring to that relationship? What does the teacher bring to the synthesis between teacher, student and learning material?

Speaking To The Ages

I recall a Hasidic tale related to me of a great, respected, much loved *Rosh Yeshiva*, the combined roles of director, teacher, and spiritual leader of an academy of learning dedicated to studying Jewish sacred texts at an adult level, usually with a traditional, “Orthodox” approach.

The *Rosh Yeshiva*’s lectures would attract a full auditorium, hanging on every word from his mouth. He would speak with great energy projecting to every corner of the room. One year a flu epidemic swept the community. The *Rebbe* came to give his lecture finding perhaps a handful of students scattered among the first few rows. He began his talk with the usual energy gesturing with his hands to squeeze every last bit of clarity to the point, projecting as if a student standing behind the last row would hear as well as one in the closest seat. A student gained the sage’s attention and asked, “Beloved *Rebbe*. I am honored to be among those in your presence. But we are only a few students, you do not need to speak as if

you were talking to hundreds.” Their teacher addressed the gathered, “When I speak to you, I do address the hundreds. My teaching goes to you, your students, their students and their students.”

This story speaks of the continuum of time. It is an awareness that we stand, not only at a milestone marking the end of history, but at a point radiating toward the end of time.

What is a synagogue-school teacher’s sense of standing along a continuum of instructors?

What manifestations are there of envisioning future teachers among their students? What in their relationship with the content of instruction reflects their experience of being the pupil?

Relativity

Steven comes up to me, and says, “You’ve got to see Sherri’s room, it’s great.” I follow him upstairs, down the bulletin board lined hall, some spectacular displays—others in need of repair or replacement (*Shanna Tova*—Happy New Year! was appropriate a month ago). I enter the room and 15 pairs of eyes are on me. When the door closes behind me Steven says, “Turn off the lights Mr. Nagel.” The room immediately gives the feel of the universe in all its spectacular glory. The blackness of the room is contrasted by the phosphorescent stars, meteors and planets painted on the walls and ceiling. The panorama reminds me of trips into the country, far from the interference of city lights, where the abundance of stars in the night sky is astounding. (My reflections)

Creating this effect has been a project of Sherri’s for several years. There are prayers which talk of the expansiveness of the universe and the stars arrayed in the cosmos. A section of *Maariv Aravim* is translated:

A vast universe: who can know it? What mind can fathom it? We look out to the endless suns and ask: What are we, what are our dreams and our hopes? (Stern, 1975, p. 147)

Sherri wants to convey the world of 2,000 years ago when these prayers were written, an era before the light bulb brought day to night, and before the “Age of Science” removed a certain aura of mystery from wonders of the universe and evoked more poetic explanations to phenomena in our lives. “Get it” is an expression I often hear. What is it

like to take an abstract concept, a spiritual message, and teach it until your students “get it?” What is it like when they don’t “get it?” What does this do to the relationship between teacher and student?

Immanuel Kant might suggest that these students have a better chance than others to grasp the concept Sherri is advancing. Kant argued that an astronomic chart would be of little use if we could not place ourselves contextually within it. He brought that lost-in-space to ground in writing:

(Not only) our geographical knowledge, (but) *even our commonest knowledge of the position of places*, would be of no aid to us if we could not, *by reference to the sides of our bodies*, assign to regions the things so ordered and the whole system of mutually relative positions. (as cited in Casey, 1993, p. 95)

Apprehending Jewish sacred texts is enhanced greatly by a geographic sense. This intelligence comes into play just to appreciate our history and traditions better as manifest in popular culture in such films as The Ten Commandments, Fiddler on the Roof, The Frisco Kid, Exodus, or Crossing Delancy. It is the ability to set Egypt south of the Sinai, Russia in Eastern Europe, the space one would traverse going from Poland to San Francisco, the Mediterranean basin, or the worlds navigated between the Lower East Side and the Upper West Side of Manhattan. What the glow-in-the-dark stars do in one classroom, maps do in another. Kant would recognize the necessity for one other decorative work present in most synagogues, a *mizrah*. Literally, *mizrah* means east. This marker identifies the eastern wall, indicating in which direction to face in order to pray toward Jerusalem. It is also a constant reminder of where we are geographically, relative to the Holy Land. Are Sherri’s stars tools for discovering relative position in the vastness of the universe? Do the maps seen in classroom after classroom set stories in place relative to our locations? What is the experience of the teacher when students feel lost in

a vast frontier? The experience of distance and proximity is explored by Casey (1993) where he says, “Felt farness has set proximity aside” (p. 57), that is, even when the distance was not great, factors conspired to bring on the feeling that was the case. Stars on the ceiling, a *mizrah*, maps on the walls are all tools to bring the setting of sacred text within reach. They are devices that dispel the anxiety that adheres when the learner despairs of reaching a destination that seems beyond charted territory.

As NASA sends satellites toward interstellar space, and the universe begins to shrink, sometimes the greatest distance is not miles, astronomical units, or light years, but the span between people standing within the reach of a handshake. I now turn to a more intimate setting where sacred text is a vehicle for bringing people together.

Am Yisrael – The People of Israel

The synagogue is a people place. The complaint I receive most about our voice mail system is not how complicated it is, but how impersonal it is. People can accept it in a business, but find it in conflict with the tradition of the synagogue. Years ago I sat in on a staff meeting called by Rabbi Kahn. One item was on the agenda, answering the phones. He explains:

We have the *mitzvah* of *hakhnasat orhim*, welcoming guests. The tradition comes from the story of Abraham who was famous for his hospitality. When someone telephones us they are becoming the modern equivalent of guests and our responsibility is to welcome them, to welcome their call.

People expect to feel welcome in a synagogue. I like to plant myself by the entrance to the school as children are arriving and as they are departing. After years of being welcomed some are still surprised by my “hello,” “have a great lesson today” or, around festivals and holidays like *Hanukkah* and Passover, “*Hag Sameah*” (Happy Holiday). Ellen takes *hakhnasat orhim* in the classroom seriously. In the minutes before class

begins she props open her door. She makes eye contact with each student as they come in the door, says, “*Boker Tov*” (Good Morning) and either directs them to the carpet for circle time or to their seats for a project. It is a smile from the teacher that greets every one of her students every day.

Rabbi Kahn’s clever interpretations and applications of the tradition have stuck with me over a decade beyond our last serious conversation. I found Rabbi Kahn to be a sage. In that regard I followed another ancient teaching, “Select a master-teacher for yourself” (*Pirke Avot* 1:6).

And So I Pray

In Virginia there is political conflict over a state government mandated moment of silence. Prayer is working its way back into the public schools. I have heard from my relatives what it was like for them as children in the 1940s and 1950s to have to endure prayers to Jesus and readings from the “New Testament” in their public school classrooms. They saw communal prayer as meaningless, a coerced performance. The attitude carried to their synagogue experience.

I grew up in the 1960s. My home was a balance between atheism and practice of meaningless ritual. The slogan, “God Is Dead” was infinitely more meaningful to me than the *Shema*’s declaration “Here O’Israel, The Lord is our God, The Lord is One.” To this day, my thoughts shift through many conceptions of the Almighty including the absence of such a being. This leads me to a measure of *angst* when it is time to pray. It is one thing to be a member of the *minyan*. There my prayer is personal and the only eyes on me are the wandering ones. We are all on equal footing. Then there are the days that I am responsible for leading prayer.

I tell the group, “We have just concluded *Hatzi Kaddish* so you know we are at a transition in the service. Next is the *Amidah* so please rise.” After chanting the first part of the *Amidah* I tell the students, “The next part of the service you will read on your own silently. Some of the prayers we are saying have been said by your parents, grandparents, great-grand parents and great-great grandparents going back hundreds, even thousands of years going all the way back to the patriarchs and matriarchs we just recalled, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Please either read the English, the Hebrew or at least just the *Hatimot* the *Baruh Ata* ... (Praised are You ...) concluding lines to each blessing.”

What are the doubts teachers of sacred literature experience? How do they bring their ongoing spiritual journey to bear on their role as guide for a roomful of children engaged in the struggle with the “Word of God?”

On some days I take the students back over some of these nineteen prayers in search of a special connection to a particular point I want to make. Traditionally, this is the main part of the service, the prayers that are recited three times a day. It is also the most disciplined part of the service. The name *Amidah* is related to the word *amud*, pillar, and *amode*, stand. When leading a group of children through the service and we get to this section, as the year progresses, more and more children independently rise to their feet to stand, some as straight as a pillar. On a few occasions I have told the children, “The *Amidah* is one of the only parts of the service with a specific rule against interrupting anyone when they are in the middle of it. On *Shabbat*, the ushers won’t even let you into the sanctuary while the congregation is in the middle of this part of the service.” I am mostly in awe of the respect my students show for this part of the service. I can be in the chapel with more than 100 fourth through seventh-grade students, many of whom I know to be capable of being highly disruptive, and they show perfect respect for this part of the service. Many strive to read every word before them. I wonder what the rabbi who wrote those words two thousand years ago would think to see the tableau

before me. Are these children moved by the power of the words, a respect for the chapel, a metaphysical sense of connection or some other force? There is a dynamic palpably at play and it is different from the behavior that will be on display only a few minutes later in the hallway and in the classroom.

Prayer works at many levels. At two particular levels there is *tefillah*, the set prayer of the three daily services and *brakhot*, prayers of praise for God for providing something or marking a special moment in time. For a long time my experience of *brakhot* was directly connected with a few specific moments in time, the Passover *Seder* and *Hanukkah*, even then, the words were all Hebrew and held no personal meaning other than that they were what was said at those times. A well-circulated joke that I recall hearing more when I was associated with a Reform congregation regarding *brakhot* goes something like this:

A man buys a brand new Mercedes Benz. He's very proud of it and is grateful to God for providing him such a wonderful thing. He goes to an Orthodox rabbi and asks what would be the proper *brakha* to recite over his new car and the rabbi refuses: "What are you, crazy? Who does such a thing?" He goes to a Conservative rabbi, and the rabbi also says no, but more politely. He goes to a Reform Rabbi who shares his enthusiasm for the beautiful car but says, "I'd be happy to help you, but first you have to tell me what's a *brakha*?"

Badda, Bing! The point of the joke can be read several ways, including righteous indignation at the suggestion that a Reform rabbi would be a stranger to *brakhot*. I will leave that track alone and follow the reasoning that the more distant one is from traditional observance, the less likely a person would be with the formalities of these prayers. It would not be a stretch to say that the Orthodox rabbi of the joke would not have spent a moment contemplating the appropriate blessing. The Conservative rabbi could have identified the right one; he just would not have considered it appropriate to

sanctify such an object. For the Reform rabbi, reflecting on God's presence and saying a prayer at such a moment would be atypical of such spiritual leaders.

I am sitting in a meeting of Conservative Jewish educators. As the group quiets down just before we get down to business a colleague says, "I just heard that David's father passed away yesterday." Quietly I hear my friend Miriam say, "*Baruch dayan haemet*" the prayer said upon hearing bad news. I am amazed at the power of her words. An equally powerful thought also crosses my mind, that I cannot see myself saying such a thing at such a moment. It is more traditionally observant than I am ready to be. Sadly, and perhaps a bit ironically, I said the same *brakha* when Miriam passed away about ten years after that meeting. What led me across that threshold? That moment can certainly be considered, if not a starting point, then a checkpoint.

A colleague tells me about a family education program she leads on *brakhot*:

I give the families worksheets with various *brakhot* on them, prayers for food, prayers said for hearing good news, bad news, doing something for the first time, seeing something extraordinary, special occasions ... I set up stations around the room and have them go from station to station, looking at the pictures and identifying which prayer is said at which moment. I've been doing it for years and it's always a big success. (Linda)

Linda sees *brakhot* as an opportunity to connect students with Judaism at a unique intersection, the one where human experience meets God and sacred text. This conversation is what brings me to look into the more nuanced world of *brakhot* and to open up a new realm of experience for myself. It also leads me to create a program for which Linda can claim to be the inspiration. In that process, coming across the prayer for seeing a magnificent mountain reminds me of the awesome mountains I experience in the western United States.

Along with 100 other skiers, I step out of the tram at the top of 11,000 foot Hidden Peak, Snowbird, in Utah's Wasatch Mountain range. There are hardly any trees. The mountain is landscaped by steep cliffs, enormous boulders and snow. We passed through clouds on the way up and from this vantage point, the sky is clear and I can see for miles. Mount Baldy, to my left is a higher peak. Twin Peaks, even taller are in front of me and a mountain of challenging diamond and double diamond slopes descends to my right. I feel energy surging through my body. At two miles above sea level there is a lot of challenging skiing between here and the bottom. These mountains are among the most awe-inspiring places I have ever had the good fortune to experience. The wind is blowing hard; the weather vane on the tram tower is a blur. I can feel the cold where my face is exposed, but that is the only place I feel a chill. I drop my skis to the snow, step into the bindings and chant, quietly,

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, עֹשֶׂה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרָאשִׁית.

(Blessed are You Adonai, our God, Ruler of the Universe who has made the works of creation.)

As I push off in the direction of my first run of the day I chant

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,

שְׁהַיֵּינוּ וְקִיָּמָנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמֶן הַזֶּה.

(Blessed are You Adonai, our God, Ruler of the Universe,
who has given us life, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this moment.)

In the process of sanctifying the moment, I have thanked God for the mountains, the snow, and for giving me the opportunity to experience this place at this time. I have crossed a threshold into a realm where I can unselfishly enjoy the bountiful experience the day promises. It has been a succession of experiences that have brought me to the point where I can comfortably and by an ingrained sense of necessity, amend my experiences with a pause to give thanks to an unseen entity. For me, prayer has meant an attunement to God's presence and an enrichment of the pleasure of a glorious day in this little bit of heaven. What would it mean to Linda and Miriam to know that their instruction led to the achievement of a complicated goal, putting instruction into practice? How do I bring my personal experience to bear on my teaching?

On Sacred Ground

Casey (1993) could well be describing a synagogue where he writes, “I also dwell in thought, as well as in history—and thus in language and value ... I dwell in multiple modes in several registers and on many levels” (p. 170). He continues, “This leaves me on the edge of dwelling, just as gardens take me to the edge between built and natural places, or rather are that very edge” (Casey, 1993, p. 170). The synagogue-school also occupies an edge. It is a boundary between the ideal world of our prayers and our teachings and the reality that does not meet that standard. It is a school experience, but not one the children experience the other 30 hours of the week. At regular turns we remind the children of the Holiness Code, a section of *Torah* that says, “I am holy, you shall be holy” (*Torah, Vayikra* 19:21). So we take in secularized children and elevate them to the sacred. We connect them to a higher spiritual plane and send them home with the holy spark rekindled. They, too, are on the edge. In many, that flame always burns bright and takes no effort to become a roaring blaze. It is the essence of their being. For others the sacred is subsumed in demands and expectations, hopes and dreams that are foreign to Jewish tradition.

I ask the students, “How many of you have been wished ‘Merry Christmas’?” About half the hands shoot up. “What do you say in response?” A boy answers, “I say Merry Christmas back to them.” A girl says, “I tell them Happy *Hanukkah*.” Another says, “I tell them I don’t celebrate Christmas.” After some discussion I summarize by saying, “We have a tradition of respecting our elders and not saying hurtful things. So your answering, Merry Christmas, is in that spirit and recognizing that the clerk did not mean to offend you. But we also have a tradition of fighting for justice, fighting for what is right and for the rights of the minority. Remember, *Hanukkah* was the first fight for religious freedom in recorded history. So in the spirit of the Maccabees and in the tradition of sticking up for ourselves and all the other people who do not celebrate Christmas, like Moslems, Jehovah’s Witnesses, or atheists, you are doing the right thing to remind people that there are people who do not celebrate Christmas and that they should be conscious, aware, of that. (My reflections)

The synagogue-school also serves as an oasis. It is a place to be refreshed and renewed between confrontations with the alienating aspects of the greater society, one that makes certain assumptions, as I describe above, about a person's being. A part of that re-invigorating process is the opportunity to explore the meaning of being Jewish in this non-Jewish society. In a sense, it leads me to recall the numerous closed circles within which I operated as an adolescent, such as youth group, swim team, and soccer team. Ethnic jokes, racy locker-room humor, and bold challenges, of questionable appropriateness to begin with, were only for circulation within those networks. These affinity groups provided the environment that allowed certain ideas to be expressed while providing a barrier of protection from the intrusion of outsiders.

Of course the synagogue-school is not the assembly gathered for ethnic jokes, crude humor, or death defying challenges, but a drawing together based on a tangible, mystical, and existentially demanded attraction, the study of sacred text. This is the bulwark against the test of being wished "Merry Christmas," being served the winning piece of King Cake, and the offer of sports tickets on a date that coincides with a holy day. What are the roles the teacher of sacred text assumes beyond the pure development of skills in reading and comprehension? What is the experience facilitating the child's negotiating this clash of cultures?

An Ancient Account

According to the *Torah*, Israelite slaves escaped bondage in Egypt, sojourned in the Sinai desert for 40 years and entered the Holy Land under the leadership of Joshua. It was in the 40-year period that a central place of worship was established, the Tabernacle or tent of assembly. Under the political-military leadership of King David, the remaining

pockets of resistance within the Holy Land were conquered, including Jerusalem, and the borders were expanded. As flawed a character as David is, after building a splendid palace, he recognizes that God is still worshipped in a tent. He contemplates building a magnificent temple but is told, “You will not build a house for My name ... for you are a man of battles and have shed blood” (*Divrei HaYamim I* [Chronicles I] 28:3). The Biblical account goes on to tell us that the honor of building the Holy Temple to God would go to David’s son Solomon. The name Solomon, *Shlomo*, in Hebrew derives from the word *Shalom*, meaning peace. Solomon would go on to build the Temple in Jerusalem, establishing that city as the central place of worship and pilgrimage for the Israelite people. These events are believed to have taken place approximately 3,000-3,500 years ago.

Of what relevance is the historical accuracy of the biblical account? What is to be learned from the characters that populate those ancient stories? According to traditional Jews, the biblical narrative is the word of God, dictated to Moses on Mount Sinai toward the end of the 40 years after the exodus from Egypt. Others believe the sacred book is a compilation of accounts retold over time, redacted into one narrative, a fairly accurate historical account, told in terms events were understood in the ancient world. Among educators in the non-traditional Jewish community, the truth of these events, is relatively unimportant. The point is what we can learn from these accounts. Does the challenge of historical accuracy become an impediment to presenting this material? What challenges manifest themselves in exploring these narratives with children born in the last decades of the twentieth century?

Recife on the Grand Scale

Over the centuries empires arose that would seek control over that land mass bordered by the Jordan River, Mediterranean Sea, Sinai Desert and the Galilean mountain range that the Jewish people called home. The 586 BCE conquest at the hands of the Babylonians exiled us from our land and scattered us throughout their empire. Casey (1993) writes about “coercive displacement” that “With no exceptions ... compulsory relocation among rural populations with strong ties to their land and homes is a traumatic experience for the majority of the relocatees” (p. 35). Perhaps it is a “miracle” that the Jewish people adjusted to this trauma of conquest and dispersion and emerged a stronger, more united nation.

Adjustments in this period of exile brought forth a new class of community leader, the rabbi, and a new spiritual focus, private rituals, public prayer, and text study. Centers for the Jewish community became the *beit midrash* (house of study), the *beit kneset* (house of assembly) and the *beit tefilah* (house of worship). Although these three exist in some guises today as independent entities, the aspects also are brought into being in a single institution, the synagogue. In this transition from central shrine to scattered congregations, Judaism defined itself as ready to experiment. What loyalty can be demanded by a tradition that strikes a balance between rigid law and adjustments to fit contemporary reality? How does a teacher negotiate ambiguity? Is it that gray area as Casey (1993) describes: “If a position is a fixed posit of an established culture, a place ... it is an essay in experimental living within a changing culture” (p. 31).

The Synagogue

Archaeological sites throughout the Middle East attest to the existence of Jewish places of sacred assembly dating before the empire of Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE). In Rabbinic terminology the place was referred to as the *beit kneset*, house of assembly. Originally, it would have been the center of activity for male elders in matters of religious observance and politics. Following the derivational trail, *beit kneset* would later take on the Greek appellation *synagogue* meaning, to lead, bring or bring together (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1991, v. 17, p. 467). In the ancient world, as well as today, the synagogue represents a place of religious instruction and worship. Its physical orientation is toward Jerusalem, the site of the twice-destroyed ancient Temple.

Traditionally many aspects of the synagogue's interior architecture are connected to the law and lore of that long destroyed center of worship and evolution of the religion over the past 2,000 years. The *aron hakodesh* (holy ark) is a reminder of the ark of the law that housed the 10 Commandments given to Moses. The *ner tamid* (eternal light) played a prominent role in the story of *Hanukkah* (167 BCE), recorded history's first revolution for religious freedom, and is considered symbolic of God's omnipresence. The synagogue has the potential to render the distance between time and space insignificant. The *mizrah* reminds all that the Holy city is over that horizon. Is this a fulfillment of Heidegger's insight, "Making the farness vanish—that is making the remoteness of something disappear, bringing it close" (1927/1962, p. 139). What meaning does this sacred space have for teachers? What is conveyed to students?

Judaism began with the hand of God pointing to a far horizon. *Avraham Aveinu*, Our Father Abraham, is told by God, "*lekh lekha*, go forth to a land that I will show you"

(*Torah, Bereshit 12:1*). Abraham leaves his familiar surroundings, goes to a distant land on the other side of the river, as the term Hebrew is sometimes explained to mean, to establish a faith and a culture based on the belief in one God. What meaning is made of this account? How do teachers make meaning of it for themselves? What do they do to enable students to make meaning of these tales?

Over time, the synagogue would bring Jewish learning and ritual observance into the life of all Jews. An almost immediate result of the destruction of the Temple and the emergence of the synagogue was that observances were no longer the sole domain of the priestly class. What similarities exist between the synagogue of over 2,000 years ago and the American synagogue of today? Is the synagogue's educational role, sustaining and developing the unique culture of the Jewish people, relevant to today? What role do the manifestations of ancient Jewish life found in the synagogue play in the evolving spiritual life of children? What actions do teachers carry out to give meaning to those manifestations, to bring those physicalities to presence?

Today, the synagogue largely is seen as a place adults assemble for religious services and children come for religious instruction. Depending on the leadership and the makeup of the community this adult element extends beyond the formal liturgy of the prayer book into talk of politics, news, and commentary on proper behavior. In many communities children of all ages are engaged in the religious services. The children's services I have been a part of are a close reflection of the adult experience.

We gather in the sanctuary. The glass walls allow those assembled to see the light of the setting sun. We turn to page one and begin with *Ashrei*. The Hebrew tells us, "Happy is the one who dwells in Your House." We progress to the *Amidah*, the spiritual core of the service. The teacher, leading the service calls on everyone to, "Please rise for the *Amidah*. Silently, either read as much of the Hebrew as you can through page 9, read the English or at least read the *Hatimot*, the signature

lines to each prayer.” After the *Amidah* we begin a discussion of the situation in Israel. A student asks, “Why doesn’t Israel just kick them all out?” Another asks, “Why doesn’t Israel just give them back their land?” A girl I have not heard from very often asks, “Why can’t they just make an agreement?” I answer the questions, occasionally turning to other students for answers. The seventh graders have been studying this situation for several years and they are well attuned to the situation. In the back of my mind I am trying to counter some of the bias of CNN and the local newspaper. We conclude with a liturgical selection, “A Prayer for the State of Israel.” (My reflections)

These are communal moments. Teachers, students, and a few parents join in. What do the teachers think in these assemblies? Is it, “I could be teaching my curriculum?” Is it, “This is a powerful opportunity for children to experience world-shaping events?” Is there a recognition of the depth of understanding the children are capable of evoking? Is this an opportunity for, as Gadamer (1960/1999) describes, “conversation (creating) a common language” (p. 378)? A possibility for leading these services is the congregation’s official spiritual leader, the rabbi. However, leading the service is a teacher. Is she usurping the rabbi’s role or communicating another message? Any one of us, girls or boys, can take on this leadership role. The *Torah* tells us, “You will be a nation of priests, a holy people” (*Torah, Shemot* 19:6). Is that message a source of inspiration? Is it meaningful and to whom? What is the reception to the teacher as spiritual leader? Is anyone asking, “Where is the rabbi?”

The Spiritual Leader

In the Jewish world, the spiritual leader is the rabbi. This has been the case since the transformations following the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. Until that time, religious life was centered on the Jerusalem Temple. Temple ritual was led by the *Kohein Gadol*, the High Priest. The priestly class was hereditary, beginning with Aaron, Moses’ older brother, and continuing along the chain of his descendants. To this day, they maintain

special rights and responsibilities within the community. With the Jewish people scattered throughout the Babylonian empire, communities in exile developed and a spiritual leadership emerged, rabbis. Traditionally Moses, the figure of epic proportions who dominates the narrative of the most sacred of Jewish documents, the *Torah*, is referred to as *Moshe Rabbeinu*. The term can be translated as Moses Our Rabbi or, as the title rabbi derives from the word teacher, Moses Our Teacher.

Moses can be understood as the Jewish people's original spiritual leader. The patriarchal fathers led a family. Moses led the Israelite nation. According to the Biblical narrative, acting reluctantly on divine command, he leads the Israelites to freedom from slavery and gives them a law to guide their existence. Fueling Moses' leadership was the quality of providing a "link (between) heaven and earth" (Segal, 2000, p. 11). The physical journey, out of Egypt on the road to the "Promised Land," is accompanied by a spiritual escape to a higher ethical plane of existence. This later element has typically been the rabbi's charge. Moses personifies the connection between an imperfect temporal Being with an ideal alternative which is not far from one's grasp. His confidence and charisma are born of a direct relationship with *HaEl HaKadosh* (the Holy God). Segal (2000) says that "having a following" is a prerequisite for being considered a "spiritual master" (p. 15). The sense of a rabbi's having that former quality feeds his or her potential for achieving the later. Moses holds enormous potential to serve as prototype for today's "spiritual masters." The potential is ever present to exemplify a Moses-like higher plane of existence, serve as leaders toward a better life, facilitate developing a relationship with God and nurture "a following" (Segal, 2000, p. 15). From Moses on to today's followers of generations of his disciples, "Even a modicum of relationship with a

master gives rise to an openness and a reception of energies that is not possible without the teacher's presence" (Segal, 2000, p. 15). Every day I see the potential for this picture's actualization. Over time, Moses developed presence, the ability to command authority. What is the influence of Moses on today's synagogue-school? When do his teachings, his leadership style, and his relationship with God come to affect the process of synagogue-school education?

The derivation of rabbi as teacher is frequently forgotten as it has become far less prominent a role the rabbi plays in the contemporary community. I wonder if this evolution has had an effect on a contemporary understanding of Moses, making him more a political figure than a teacher. Among the more visible responsibilities of the rabbi are leader of prayer services, officiant at life cycle ceremonies, family counselor and community spokesperson. This is not to say that the rabbi has abdicated the role of teacher. The evolution of the American Jewish community has tended to keep the rabbi away from the children. The responsibility for their education has been transferred to *morim*, another term for teacher that shares its derivation with the word *Torah*. The rabbi tends to work collaboratively with teachers giving input into the content of learning, appearing as a scholar-in-residence to the school community, and serving as a lightning rod and troubleshooter for problems in the school. The classroom teacher may very well ask, what does the rabbi mean to my colleagues and me? What is the rabbi's role in this community? I ask, what influence does the rabbi's presence or absence have on teachers?

Neil Gillman is a prominent rabbi, author, and professor. Three years after his visit to my congregation for a scholar-in-residence weekend, his lesson to a group of seventh graders and their parents is ongoing in its influence. The title of the discussion

was “Where was God on 9/11?” At one point a student declares, “I don’t believe in God.” Rabbi Gillman responds in a welcoming tone, “Tell me about the God you don’t believe in.” Under his skillful guidance, students and parents go beyond their almost embryonic understandings of the “Almighty” and begin to redefine their conceptions of this fundamental Jewish assumption.

The “Where was God ...” dialogue is a perpetual exchange. It long precedes this scholar-in-residence weekend and is almost certainly destined to remain a long-standing element of the curriculum, just with an evolving predicate. The “9/11” of the Gillman program can be replaced with: “during the Holocaust,” “when a person is struck with cancer,” “when a natural disaster leaves many innocent lives destroyed,” or any other time “God’s hand” seems to be absent from human history. The experience with Rabbi Gillman resurfaces on numerous occasions among teachers and is a defining event for the class that had the direct experience with him. His use of a relationship, free of the preconceived expectations that come with an ongoing interaction, is a tool for changing many students’ thinking on an essential topic. This exchange benefits from what Levinas (1995/1999) describes as, “the freedom of the Self is called into question by the Other” (p. 82). He taps into the energy the freshness of the exchange brings. In the process, he facilitates the elimination of an obstacle, a particular, narrow, understanding of God. Overcoming that impediment makes possible the exploration of numerous other topics, and the pursuit of whole new avenues of experience. This is a unique role a rabbi can play.

On another occasion, my rabbi calls me into his study. “Please look over this book, tell me what you think. It is something I think we should be teaching in the

school.” This is one other way the rabbi may have an influence on the school, setting an agenda. In this case it was for the introduction of the study of *tallit* and *tefillin*.

Reviewing the book later, I was struck by one of the opening paragraphs recognizing that over the course of three generations, knowledge in the skill of wrapping *tefillin* went from being taught as a matter of course in the home, father to son, to the necessity for a textbook to revive the ritual. That confession revealed an added dimension that challenges Jewish education: how much learning is supposed to take place in the home? What experience should a teacher expect to be a part of every student’s life? What is the influence on the teacher of the depth of Jewish experience students bring to the classroom? How is that carried out in the relationship between teacher and parent?

The *tallit* and *tefillin* book was just one experience with the rabbi interested in seeing his priorities reflected in the school curriculum. On other occasions I have had him suggest we do more to teach *Shabbat* home rituals, *Torah*, and Israel. An Israeli Hebrew expression is, *Juke ba’rosh*, literally a cockroach in your head. The meaning is you have an idea you cannot get out of your mind until you act on it, an obsession. My particular *juke ba’rosh* is for social action projects. Who else gets an educational *juke ba’rosh*?

An Endless Horizon

When I first started teaching all I wanted to teach was Israel. (Sherri)

When the children have learned these 32 words they really begin to unlock understanding of almost all of the prayers. (Beth)

I want them to understand the Jewish contribution to the Labor movement. That’s what really excites me. (Joyce)

Judaism is all about connections. (Reuven)

Casey presents us with Derrida's observation, "A horizon is always virtually present in every experience; for it is at once the unity and the incompleteness for that experience—the anticipated unity in every incompleteness" (as cited in Casey, 1993, p. 62). I take this as representing the great depth and breadth to Jewish study. As a teacher and curriculum planner, I find the choices excruciatingly difficult to make. I recall the apocryphal university professor's lectures punctuated by endless digressions until the original thread is lost. Such can easily be the case in the synagogue-school classroom. Sherri's lesson on Israel approaches the horizon, but there is always more to learn on the subject, more interpretations to make of history, more reactions to make to unfolding events. Beth's prayer lesson is never truly complete since there is always one more liturgical selection to take on. Joyce's lesson on the labor movement has its basis in the Jewish experience in 19th century Europe, the *Talmud*, and the centuries old tradition of gathering for public worship. In Reuven's terms, "Judaism is all about connections."

What is our connection to this place, the synagogue-school? The institution is a place of sacred assembly. It is also a house of study. When children come to the synagogue-school their attention is on the school. In almost every European language the name for the "place of instruction" is related to the Latin *schola* and the Greek *scholē*. The Yiddish term for synagogue is *shul* giving recognition to the dual roles of the institution, house of worship and house of study. The Greek etymology includes the concepts leisure, discussion, and lecture. We add a dimension, religious. How is the integration made between these roles? Is it a liberating alliance or is it limiting structure?

Being a synagogue-school teacher is a sacred responsibility. When I entered the field the rallying theme came from one of the daily prayers, "And you shall teach these

words to your children” (*Torah, Devarim* 6:9). We have a seemingly endless list of subject areas to cover with an unbroken chain of connections linking them into a vast whole. The bounds of time and space are virtually non-existent, epitomized in a God who, as the hymn says, “He was, He is, He will be” (Harlow, 1985, p. 515). We bring to the task our past experience as teachers, as students, and as Jews. We bring the baggage of thousands of years of history and tradition and a hope for the future. We bring a love of study and scholarship. We have a responsibility to be present in the world. What is the experience of work space equaling sacred space? What is it like to guide the exploration of an ethical-moral tradition that stands in contrast to human nature and materialist society? What is the essence of teaching the sacred?

I have begun to chart a course for exploring the lived experience of teaching Jewish sacred literature. A hiker would be familiar with the slashes of paint used to mark North American trails. In this study, our forest will be the synagogue and its allied synagogue-school. The paint slashes could represent classrooms or the progression through the grades. The highlights of a trail can be those defining features that make every individual engaged in the project of Jewish study a unique contributor to the process. The diversity of life in a wild habitat can be represented by the varieties of students, or equally well, the varieties of teachers. In these opening chapters I have called into question many themes that may be manifest in the phenomenon of teaching Judaism’s sacred texts.

In my next chapter I lay out the philosophy that underwrites this effort to draw nearer to the essences that define this phenomenon. It is the human science of phenomenology, an approach pioneered in the 20th century by Edmund Husserl, Hans-

Georg Gadamer, and Martin Heidegger and further advanced in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, and Emmanuel Levinas.

CHAPTER THREE:

PHILOSOPHICAL ORIENTATION AND METHODOLOGY

Being Jewish and Being a Heideggerian Philosopher

See, I neologize Jewish and *goyish*. There's like, the literal meaning—first I'll start with *goyish* ... *Goy*—"one who is not Jewish ..." Now a Jew—dictionary style—"one who is descended from the ancient tribes of Judea, or one who is descended from that tribe."

Now I neologize Jewish and *goyish*. Dig: I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish. Eddie Cantor's *goyish*. B'Nai Brith is *goyish*; Hadassah, Jewish. Marine corps—heavy *goyim*, dangerous. Kool-Aid is *goyish*. All Drake's cakes are *goyish*. Pumpnickel is Jewish, and, as you know, white bread is very *goyish*. Instant potatoes—*goyish*. Black cherry soda's very Jewish. Macaroons are very Jewish—very Jewish cake. Fruit salad is Jewish. Lime jello is *goyish*. Lime soda is very *goyish*. Trailer parks are so *goyish* that Jews won't go near them. Jack Paar Show is very *goyish*. Underwear is definitely *goyish*. Balls are *goyish*. Titties are Jewish. Mouths are Jewish. All Italians are Jewish. Greeks are *goyish*—bad sauce. Eugene O'Neil—Jewish; Dylan Thomas, Jewish. Steve is *goyish*, though. It's the hair. He combs his hair in the boys' room with that soap all the time. (Cohen, 1970, p. 31)

What compels me to start this chapter with a limit-pushing comedy routine from a humorist who was repeatedly prosecuted for obscenity? How are the concepts of philosophical orientation and methodology advanced by dividing the world into Jewish and not-Jewish, *goyish*? Perhaps it is a stretch. Suffice it to say that Lenny Bruce rose to fame in a period of dramatic transition for American society, the 1960s. When he first took the stage, racism, prejudice, and discrimination in the form of denying a seat at a lunch counter, a job, or housing based on race, religion, or national creed were perfectly legal and could only be challenged on moral or ethical grounds. It is widely accepted that were Bruce's humor, infused with "obscene language" and daring jabs at the social order, performed only a decade later, he would have had no problems with the law. Of course, had those standards gone unchallenged, even laying low for a decade would not have given him the freedom to perform his particular approach to stand-up comedy. As such,

Bruce acts in the spirit of the Biblical prophets who say that a higher order of reasoning finds society to be obscene, and calls on the people to reform, to bring about social justice. Bruce also represents an aspect of Judaism that has resided in my consciousness for a long time. I believe there is a Jewish way of looking at the world. At almost any point in the last 2,000 years, Jews have looked at the ambient society in which they were sojourning, adapted the positive elements, sustained their unique ethnic habits in other realms, and found a common ground regarding others. Always there were certain lines, that if crossed, indicated a break from the traditions of Jewish community.

“Jewish and *Goyish*,” the name regularly given this Lenny Bruce routine, well illustrates my experience with hermeneutic phenomenology, the philosophic and methodological approach I have adopted for this study of the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting. Bruce speaks to the meanings attached to language, associations with objects and concepts that construct meaning, and interpreting the meaning of experience. What makes pumpernickel Jewish and white bread *goyish*? His words have such resonance among Jews because he articulates what many feel, that there is an “us” and a “them,” a cultural divide between Jewish and *Goyish*. It is not a hostile border, not even an impervious one. Were the objects to be charted as on a political map, parts of Bruce’s list would be Jewish territory, and the remainder would be outside of those bounds. As an individual immersed in Jewish thought, that is, the more than two millennia dialogue on the meaning of life based on an interpretive synthesis and analysis of text and lived experience, the tradition of hermeneutic phenomenology can be seen as *mishpacha* (family), familiar and as Jewish as answering a question with a question.

Throughout my first two chapters I have been charting a course that explores the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting. My encampments along the way have been intended to come progressively closer to this phenomenon, revealing more features of that lived experience. The compass that has kept me on track has been hermeneutic phenomenology. In this chapter I elaborate on the philosophical orientation and methodology that guides this study. I have already introduced Heidegger as a central figure in this approach. He writes:

Every inquiry is a seeking ... Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought. Inquiry is a cognizant seeking for an entity both with regard to the fact that it is and with regard to its Being as it is. This cognizant seeking can take the form of investigating ... in which one lays bare that which the question is about and ascertains its character ... all inquiry about something is somehow a questioning of something ... an inquiry has that which is interrogated. In investigative questions ... what is asked about is determined and conceptualized. Furthermore, in what is asked about there lies also that which is to be found out by the asking; this is what is really intended: with this the inquiry reaches its goal. (1927/1962, p. 24)

This is the mandate I propose following. It is an investigation into the Being of synagogue-school teachers. This Being is the essence of this study. In previous chapters I relate that this “what is sought” calls itself to be interrogated in a unique way, one that has proven elusive to other research methodologies. Gadamer (1960/1999) writes, “The human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science ... modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science” (p. xxii). He goes on to reference Droysen who says that whereas the experimental method is the approach of the natural sciences, here the method is based on researching a topic of interest.

In Rabbinic thought, the concept of *Yetzer Tov* and *Yetzer Ra*, competing inclinations within human Being toward good or evil behavior, helps explain the choices

we make in life. While I do not intend to paint the experimental camp as good or evil, I want to clarify that I am acting on a particular inclination, toward what Gadamer (1960/1999) describes as “the subjective modes of givenness” (p. 244). In a less forgiving mode, he writes, “Historical objectivism resembles statistics, which are such excellent means of propaganda because they let the ‘facts’ speak and hence simulate an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked” (p. 301). Here is a challenge to the assurance of scientific methods. He asserts a greater truth claim to this “discipline of questioning and inquiring” (p. 491). As van Manen (2003) describes this alternative, “not really a ‘method’ understood as a set of investigative procedures that one can master relatively quickly [instead, it is] a set of guides and recommendations for a principled form of inquiry” (pp. 29-30). Another rabbinic insight, referring to the *Torah* presents the challenge to “turn it turn it for everything is in it” (*Pirke Avot* 5:23).

It is through the interrogation of the Being of synagogue-school teachers that I “lay bare,” as Heidegger puts it, that entity (1927/1962, p. 257). My experience is that synagogue school teaching does not lend itself to one size fits all policies in any way. Teachers vary in strengths, classes are inconsistent, and a single child, a wild card, can have a huge influence on the interactions of everyone involved. While experimental research pursues the “generalizable ... pheonomenology is ... a philosophy or theory of the unique” (van Manen, 2003, pp. 6-7). It has been my intention to “determine and to conceptualize” that which we call the teacher of sacred text. It is my feeling that this “phenomenological sensitivity” has best enabled me to accomplish that aim (p. 2).

This chapter is intended to lead to a sustained dialogue. Aristotle refers to “problema” as unresolvable questions, which is very likely where this phenomenon lies

(Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 376). My purpose, here is to advance understanding, “being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 379).

The Being of Teacher and Sacred Text

Gadamer gives an insight into this concept of sacred text. He portrays the distinction between sacred and its opposite, profane, as relative terms. In a synagogue setting, where does the sacred begin? Is it the holy ark in which the *Torah* scrolls are kept, the *bima* (stage) on which the ark rests, the sanctuary, everywhere in the building or even everywhere on the grounds? Gadamer also carries the term sacred beyond religious conceptions. An image that comes to mind is a long ago *National Lampoon* magazine cover with the iconic image of Che Guevara getting a pie in that famous face, the caption questioning, “Is Nothing Sacred?” (1972). In this conception of sacred, propriety would call on one to respect that which is revered by another. However, it would not necessarily be expected that the revered would be universally accepted as sacred. He further adds that while one might admire a sacred object, it should not be assumed to be on the same terms.

By way of example, standing before Michelangelo’s *Pieta* holds me entranced. Unless I were asked to describe my awe, it would not be apparent that in my eyes this was a work of historic significance and great artistic merit. Still, I would be offended by a vandal’s destructive attack on it and, in a broader sense, I may even define that as an act of desecration (Gadamer, 1960/1999). In Gadamer’s discussion on literature, he ascribes a degree of respect to the written word bordering on sacred. Distinctions in literature that he points out are “claims to truth” and the “miracle” involved in “deciphering and

interpreting” and bringing the past to the present (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 163). This journey that I am embarking on takes this understanding and duplicates it on multiple levels. There is the teacher’s personal search for the sacred in the text, the students’ response to a similar challenge, and the teacher’s effort to facilitate that process, which, like my experience of the Pieta, a tour guide could not assume my appreciation is one of religious passion.

Perhaps the more fundamental question I ask regards the Being of the teacher of sacred text. Gadamer (1960/1999) lets on that people are creatures and creations of their past:

In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live. The focus of subjectivity is a distorting mirror. The self-awareness of the individual is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life. That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being. (pp. 276-277)

We bring to experience our subjectivity, our likes, dislikes and the forces that shaped and continue to mold us. Among the social forces that have impacted on society is an evolved relationship with authority. We ebb and flow in the balance between responsibility to self and to society and in our obedience to voices of authority. What has the challenge of individual authority as opposed to hierarchical authority done to shape relations in the synagogue-school classroom?

Investigative Tools

When does an investigation begin? Is it the moment an air of mystery clouds one’s understanding? Is it when the first questions are formulated? Does the journey begin when the investigator accepts the challenge? I now turn to the Lithuanian born, one

time student of Husserl and Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas' writings are well placed to bridge the Christian-anti-Christianity of Heidegger and the religious-theological Judaism that informs my investigation. In *Revelation in the Jewish Tradition* Levinas (1990) writes:

Man is ... the irruption of God within Being, or the bursting out of Being towards God; man is the fracture in Being which produces the act of giving, with hands which are full, in place of fighting and pillaging. This is where the idea of being chosen comes from, an idea which can deteriorate into pride, but originally expresses the awareness of an appointment which cannot be called into question; an appointment which is the basis of ethics and which, through its indisputability, isolates the person in his responsibility. (p. 202)

Levinas adds an ethical dimension to phenomenology that is missing from Heidegger. Here is humanity's unique role in existence, driven by forces sometimes at odds with pure self-interest. The sense of "appointment" in tandem with the existential "responsibility," is an intersection that can advance our understanding of the phenomenon of this study. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1961/1979) speaks of this dimension, "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other, ethics" (p. 43). This is the lifeworld of a teacher. Being without the Other is not Being for a teacher. Gadamer (1960/1999) goes further down this path, describing the lifeworld as "the whole in which we live as historical creatures ... a communal world that involves being with other people," and conceptually as the "antithesis of all objectivism" (p. 247).

Before beginning any grand expedition a stocktaking must be conducted. Any more than I would want to ensure that before I attempt to scale a rock face that my ropes are strong, my harness tight and my partner attentive, I would like to revisit the fundamental principles on which this inquiry is based. In partnering with Heidegger, Levinas, Gadamer, and van Manen, I have assembled a team that will lead me to new

discoveries and who will enable me to be drawn into the phenomenon of the lived experience of teachers of sacred literature in a synagogue-school setting.

Perhaps the most important marker I can lay down is what Gadamer (1960/1999) defines as “the true locus of hermeneutics ... (the) in-between ... of familiarity and strangeness” (p. 295). Of all the research methodologies I considered for this study, hermeneutic phenomenology is the most distant from the realm of the familiar. The poet, Frost, may have described it as, “the road less traveled” (as cited in Ferguson, Salter, & Stallworthy, 1996, p. 1127). It is perhaps a personal comfort level with the unfamiliar that enables the journey to be guided in this unorthodox philosophy. As this chapter proceeds I further elaborate on how “Hermeneutics ... work is not to develop a procedure of understanding, but to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place ... these conditions do not amount to a ‘procedure’ or method which the interpreter must of himself bring to bear on the text” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 295).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

In order to understand just what phenomenology is and to recognize how it offers a unique insight into exploring synagogue-school teaching, the best place to begin is with the vocabulary of this philosophical school. Heidegger (1927/1962) begins his quest in *Being and Time* with the question of the meaning of Being. He defines Being as: “the most universal concept ... indefinable ... [and] self-evident” (pp. 22-23). His contention is that this is a pathway of philosophic thought that has been neglected. He wants to clear the brush and continue the search. It is prescient that this work begins in such a fashion. An essential element of hermeneutics is questioning that which is brought to our consciousness. Gadamer (1960/1999) writes, “The essence of the question is to open up

possibilities and keep them open” (p. 299). This recalls a lesson Plato learned from Socrates, “that it is more difficult to ask questions than to answer them” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 362). This is the dialectic of phenomenological text gathering, a dialectic in which “the art of questioning is the art of questioning ever further” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 367). In provoking reflection, I seek that state between pre-reflection and transforming those experiences into interpretation. It is a thoughtful process, pursuing even the back-story of an answer, ever conscious of the lure of accepting casual responses. Within the context of this study, it is the ontology of a teacher of sacred literature that I intended to open up to investigation. Gadamer’s (1960/1999) discussion of “the close relation between questioning and understanding” (p. 374) inspires the relentless interrogative nature of this approach, as meaning is pursued, and as “questioning opens up possibilities of meaning” (p. 375). This is the fulfillment of the expectation that the nature of the dialectic is “question and answer” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 471).

The essence of this approach to pursuing understanding of lived experience in general, and the subject of this study in particular, comes from the definition of phenomenology offered in *Being and Time*, “to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 58). A phenomenon is “that which shows itself as Being and as a structure of Being” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 63). Mediating these terms, Heidegger (1927/1962) restates Husserl’s maxim that distinguishes this philosophy, “To the things themselves!” (p. 58). This is to say that I pursued this study by giving voice to teachers of sacred literature. It was they who reflected on the existentials that define their lived experience, producing

“careful description of a lived experience” (van Manen, 2003, p. 24). It is their “original experience” (p. 31) that is the source of text. Through this inquiry I brought forward the meaning of this entity toward which I turn my attention. Heidegger (1927/1962) cautions, “It remains itself naïve and opaque if in its researches into the Being of entities it fails to discuss the meaning of Being in general” (p. 31).

Philosophy and the Philosopher

In essence, the case I am making is that Heidegger’s writings stand as a unique, essential contribution to philosophical thought. As an approach to research, this path would never have opened up had he not picked up where his teachers and predecessors left off and taken phenomenology to heights it may never have achieved otherwise. The question I pose is, can we separate the works from this man who by many standards could be described as contemptible?

In the Germany of the 1920s, when Heidegger wrote *Being and Time*, the National Socialist (Nazi) party was an insignificant band of misfits; the country was ineffectively governed by a democratic parliament; and the economy was a wreck, largely as a result of crippling reparations payments imposed on the republic following a failed military offensive, the 1914-1919 “Great War.” Germany’s redemption seemed to be possible when Adolph Hitler became the leader of the Nazi party, guiding them to increased representation in parliament and, in 1933, leadership of the governing coalition. By 1934 Hitler had dictatorial rule over Germany. Over the course of a decade his regime launched a global war with submarines sinking American ships, sometimes within sight of east coast cities, the occupation of countries as far north as Norway, as far south as north Africa, rockets fired on London from France, and ground forces pushing as far east

as Stalingrad (now called Volgograd). Underwriting his party was the principle of the German people as a “master race.” This racist worldview, carried to its extreme, allowed for the enslavement, the use for scientific experimentation, and wholesale slaughter of so called “*untermenschen*,” sub-humans, and a program of genocide directed against the Jewish people.

Heidegger dedicated the work on which much of this study is being approached, *Being and Time*, to his professor, Edmund Husserl, a Jew, “In friendship and admiration” (1927/1962, p. 5). His lover for many years was also Jewish, Hanna Arendt (Ettinger, 1997, pp. 1-2). Further surrounding him in academia were many other Jews (Ettinger, 1997, p. 36). Despite Hitler’s irrational speeches about the Jews being the source of Germany’s problems, Heidegger enthusiastically cast his lot with the Nazi party (Safranski, 1998, p. 233). He officially became a party member, attended meetings, and gave speeches surrounded by all the trappings of the fascist government (Safranski, 1998, pp. 242-247). All these were sufficient demonstrations that this was a well-connected individual. Given the widely feared, unbridled power of the police state, Heidegger was not one to be safely gossiped about or opposed. The philosopher’s career was clearly on the rise in this period. It did not come crashing down until he soured on the Nazis, and quit the party (Safranski, 1998, p. 281-282). His downfall was nearly complete when the Third Reich was toppled by the Allied armies. His rehabilitation was slow in coming. With this evidence, however, I find it difficult to label him an anti-Semite.

I have participated in many discussions on the ethics of tainted goods. A particularly provocative debate involved the contemporary use of Nazi medical science. The subject was experiments carried out in concentration camps and other sites on

unwilling participants, under the cruelest conditions conceivable, that anti-vivisection societies would decry if carried out on monkeys or mice. The findings, however, could save lives today, perhaps giving meaning to those who died from the inhumane abuse. My early adolescent students consistently say to use the research, but work to prevent such abuses from ever occurring again. I side with their logic.

In that spirit, I condemn Heidegger's Nazi party affiliations and the contemptible actions he carried out on their behalf, particularly authorizing the dismissal of Jewish faculty from Freiberg University. That he was never able to regain the level of respect an academician of his intellectual heft should have enjoyed in the post-World War II decades is sufficient and just punishment for his abject failings, albeit in difficult times. A Jewish ethic teaches, "Where no one is a decent person, strive to be a decent person" (*Pirke Avot*, 3:8). Heidegger could well have heeded this message, which as much as anything, speaks to the fact that Hitler's crimes against humanity could not have been carried out without thousands of willing accomplices.

That there is an absence of evidence to conclude that Heidegger himself was anti-Semitic grants him a measure of grace. His philosophical direction leading up to and expressed in *Being and Time* (1927/1962) came well before Hitler's *Mein Kampf* could have been of any influence on his thinking. Hitler's book, to little notice, became publicly available in that same year. There is no evidence that it became a topic of discussion in Heidegger's circles. Even if it had, the illogical ravings, the rabid anti-Semitism of the uneducated Fascist would likely have been subject of ridicule rather than a vehicle for thoughtful conversation, particularly given the number of Jews who were close to Heidegger in this period.

Nonetheless, it is a challenge for me, as a Jewish communal professional, to participate in advancing Heidegger's work. It is an ancient Jewish ethic, rooted in the Bible to give credit to a source. There is a certain obscenity, therefore, in giving Heidegger this honor. In *Being Jewish / Reading Heidegger*, Scult (2004) says of the ethical dilemma of coming into Heidegger's company:

Of course the relationship does require a bit of maintenance work around the edges in order to preserve an appropriate emotional distance from the man as he lived, while at the same time permitting the most intense intellectual and spiritual intimacy with the man as he thought and wrote. (p. 1)

Scult's book goes on to detail the remarkable confluence between the thousands of years of Jewish hermeneutic text study and the philosophy articulated by Heidegger. While he makes the case that Heidegger was deliberate in writing out centuries of Jewish philosophy, I would only remove the word "deliberate" from that statement. It is my sense that Heidegger was not only unaware of this stream of thought, but was surrounded by Jews who were equally poorly versed in the body of wisdom literature produced by the Talmudic sages, Philo of Alexandria and Maimonides, to name a few references, that may have proved enlightening. It is clear that Arendt, who fled Nazi Germany before World War II broke out, was typical of much of German Jewry in her ignorance of these writings. Perhaps it would be too much to expect her to condemn Heidegger, but the record shows that she continued to esteem Heidegger's intellectual work decades after the war. In her essay, "Heidegger at Eighty," she says:

The wind that blows through Heidegger's thinking—like that which still sweeps towards us after thousands of years from the work of Plato—does not spring from the century he happens to live in. It comes from the primeval, and what it leaves behind is something perfect, something which, like everything perfect ... falls back to where it came from. (as cited in Scult, 2004, pp. 1-2)

As I have progressed through my graduate studies, there have been many occasions when I have felt that the period of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle is portrayed as without precedent, as if there was no philosophical tradition setting the stage for their breakthroughs. I have consistently integrated in my writings, citations for which the case could be made, preceded and likely influenced the Greeks who came in contact with eastern thought through Alexander the Great's conquests in the fourth century BCE. On my part, this has been a subtle effort to set the intellectual record a bit straighter. However, I am uniquely placed between the academic world of a secular university and my professional world as a Jewish educator. I believe that I come to this with an academic background that was lacking on the part of Husserl, Arendt, and others of Heidegger's inner circle and from which he would have benefited, but that he can not be accused of having been belligerent in overlooking. In addition, it is a world to which he had little, if any access. That said, I disagree with Scult on this secondary point, but fully support his reasoning on the primary concern. A case Scult makes is to join him and "Take Heidegger at his word to see where it takes ... (us)" (p. 10).

I regard the publication of *Being and Time* as a watershed event in philosophy. It is a watershed in the sense that geographical terrain brings together disparate sources to form a lake, which then may empty out into yet another lake, which in turn seeks an even lower altitude. Heidegger's work can be seen as one of those intermediate lakes, a pooling of philosophical thought that he attributed to the Greeks without pursuing their predecessors. His successors are the lower lakes, fed from the upper elevations. Does Heidegger pollute the downstream lakes? To follow this metaphor, I prefer to reason that Heidegger the philosopher fed the streams with an enduring work, "perfect" in Arendt's

words, while Heidegger the man departed from that environment, contaminating another system, particularly by contributing to the expulsion of intellectual capital from German universities and his future work clearly tainted by what became his Nazi past.

Like a government declassifying secret documents or releasing them after an FOI request for the benefit of scholarship, I find it morally defensible to conduct this study based on Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. There is even opportunity for irony in contemplating that this particular use of the philosophy is for the advancement of Jewish education. I have made efforts to glean from Husserl, Sartre, Levinas, and others support for this project with the express desire of avoiding or minimizing my dependence on Heidegger. Husserl's work is incomplete without the further development of Heidegger. The others' works are founded on this failed figure's thought. This leaves Heidegger's philosophical works as necessary for conducting this study. As a human I find him contemptible, a failure when ethically challenged, and an opportunist. My sentiments are with Levinas, who lost many family members to the Holocaust and spent time in a German prisoner of war camp. He says, "One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger" (Levinas, 1990, p. 25). Ultimately, even without the intimidating presence of Gestapo agents and SS guards, he also is a foundational figure in philosophical thought and in any circumstance, not one with whom to be trifled.

Dasein

Central to Heidegger's philosophy is the entity "*Dasein*" (1927/1962, p. 32). I proceed with the understanding that this is an awareness of Being, a manner of being, and "an understanding of Being" (p. 32). *Dasein* has presence and is addressed as "I am" or

“You are” (p. 68). It can be characterized by “mineness,” “possibility” and “authenticity” (p. 68). *Dasein* is the entity that is the focus of this study. I answer the “Who am I?” question with “I am a teacher of Jewish sacred texts.” My project is to bring forward the essences of that entity.

Dasein, literally translates as “Being-there” (p. 81). This is connected to “Being-in-the-world,” the essential state of *Dasein*. As a state of activity, “knowing the world—or rather addressing oneself to the ‘world’ and discussing it—thus functions as the primary mode of Being-in-the-world” (p. 85). Another concept that is attached to this discussion is “concern” (p. 83). That the subject of my investigation is a response to an ethical calling, a choice, this interpretation of *Dasein* provides another avenue toward understanding my phenomenon of interest. What is the “Being-in-the-world” of the synagogue-school teacher? With what do they have “concern”?

Heidegger (1927/1962) identifies that an impediment or misleading signal to investigating “*Dasein*’s Being is an orientation thoroughly colored by the anthropology of Christianity and the ancient world, whose inadequate ontological foundations have been overlooked both by the philosophy of life and by personalism” (p. 74). I agree that this social and cultural movement has had a profound and frequently detrimental impact on Western thought. I am particularly concerned with how it is the window through which religion is seen. Despite the diversity of spiritual orientations informed by Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism, for example, it is the template of Christianity that for many is the basis for their approach to religious community. This complication is an existential that I pursued in this inquiry. What impediments are encountered in engaging in the teaching, or the study, of Jewish sacred text?

This journey has been one of discovery, just as the great explorers of centuries ago set out into uncharted territory with little to prepare them for what they would find in the “New World.” A guiding procedure was “*Logos*,” a Greek term essentially distilled to mean “discourse” (p. 55). It was through the exchange of words that the phenomenon was brought into the light. Gadamer (1960/1999) adds, “Language is the form in which understanding is achieved” (p. xxxiv). It is in this realm of respect for language that I see one of many crossroads of Judaism and Heidegger’s philosophy. The Fall holiday of *Yom Kippur* reminds observant Jews of the value of words and the importance of taking promises seriously. One of the opening prayers, *Kol Nidrei*, meaning All Vows, is a petition for absolution from promises to God. This is in contrast to American aphorisms such as, “Talk is cheap” or “An oral agreement isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on.” Words can be cheapened or made to seem of little consequence. At this nexus, however, we see two value-systems affirming the priceless worth of discourse. Alternatively, phenomenology is a pursuit of the meaning of “average everydayness—the kind of Being which is *closest* to *Dasein*” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 94). As I pursued the far horizon, it was the territory within the bounds of that virtual border that was the focus of my attention.

In this exploration, I look at what is defined as “present-at-hand,” that is, the ontology of things as being in place by design or as a result of random positioning. In the lifeworld of synagogue-school teachers and the settings in which they carry out their work, this existential comes into play. Heidegger (1927/1962) recognizes a particular relationship between religious-spiritual life and the natural-physical world, in this statement:

Churches and graves, for instance, are laid out according to the rising and the setting of the sun—the regions of life and death, which are determinative for *Dasein* itself with regard to its ownmost possibilities of Being in the world. (p. 137)

The points of the compass are of significance to Jewish life, particularly the direction toward Jerusalem, as well as the rising and the setting of the sun. Questioning the meaning of space and place has the potential for bringing closer the *Dasein* of synagogue-school teachers.

It is within this context that Heidegger (1927/1962) also introduces “De-severance ... making the farness vanish—that is making the remoteness of something disappear, bringing it close” (p. 139). This works at two levels. At one is the perspective of the researcher, “reflectively bringing into nearness that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude to everyday life” (van Manen, 2003, p. 32). This is the challenge to maintain a particular focus on the topic of interest, one of the previously mentioned research activities. The other level is the de-severing manifest in the life of the synagogue-school teacher. Does it take place in the gaps of time and space between twenty-first century America and the BCE world of the *Torah*? Is it in the range spanning the epoch of the ancient sages who gave that text a particular vitality and the contemporary period in which it is currently being challenged? Is it the farness between the life of observance taught toward and the reality of children’s ritual life? Or is it existent in yet another form beyond my horizon, but visible from the crow’s nest the teacher occupies? *Dasein*, as Heidegger (1927/1962) suggests, acts toward de-severance.

De-severance also speaks of an historical consciousness. There is much in Jewish tradition that speaks to patterns of behavior, such as religious rituals, habits of mind, ways of relating to the world or others, passed down from generation to generation. In the

context of “historicity,” Gadamer says; “Throughout the changing destinies of men, the continuity of life persists unbroken” (1960/1999, p. 203). He continues this discussion introducing the significance of “the interplay of powers” in shaping history (p. 207). In investigating the lived experience of synagogue-school teachers it is important to arrive at an understanding of their relationship to power and history as they step into a prominent role in the transmission of historic teachings and a faith handed down over the course of several millennia. Ranke contemplates, “I imagine the Deity—if I may allow myself this observation—as seeing the whole of historical humanity in its totality (since no time lies before the Deity), and finding it all equally valuable” (as cited in Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 210). It is important to see how teachers relate to this image. Do they see their work as an “equally valuable” episode in the sweep of history?

An element that is introduced to this discussion is that of “the movement of moral powers” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 213). The sacred text that is the bedrock content of the synagogue-school, is, at its core, a statement of ethical principles. What is the synagogue-school teacher’s sense of being an “element in the forward progress of the moral world” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, pp. 214-215)? Earlier, I speak of pushing through the virtual barrier of the horizon line. Do teachers experience an episodic encounter bracketed by “before and after,” or a fusion of the continuum of experiences, what Gadamer describes as “a unified flow of experience” (1960/1999, p. 245)?

It is Heidegger’s intention to “proceed towards the concept of Being by way of an interpretation of a certain special entity, *Dasein*, in which we shall arrive at the horizon for the understanding of Being and for the possibility of interpreting it; the universality of the concept is not belied by the relatively ‘special’ character of our investigation”

(1927/1962, p. 63). The image here of the horizon is an outer boundary. Gadamer expands the image to “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth” (1960/1999, p. 302). These steps mirror the Jewish worshipper whose spiritual journey is oriented toward Jerusalem, the prayer in Jerusalem, where one is oriented toward the Western Wall, and standing in the shadows of that holy site chants to a God whose presence is understood and interpreted. It is this philosophical perspective that sets me on a course toward the boundless, far horizon that Gadamer portrays, of the Being of the teacher of sacred text.

Absorbed in the World

“Fascinated with its world,” is a description given to *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 149). The hermeneutic philosopher’s attitude toward research is further described as “absorbed in the world” (p. 149). He speaks about a heightened engagement with existence and an ongoing dialogue with the world. To a great extent, it is the everyday that is being questioned in a drive to reveal the essence of the synagogue-school teacher’s existence. This is the “*substance*” (p. 153) of this inquiry and the spirit in which it is carried out. The aim is to “understand how this man, this people, or this state is what it has become or, more generally, how it happened that it is so” (p. 5).

It is the world of the synagogue-school teacher, the teacher of Jewish sacred text that I seek to enter. The primary means is through conversation. True to the spirit of this approach, “No one knows in advance what will ‘come out’ of a conversation” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 383). The picture given is that, “We fall into conversation ... the way one

word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion ... but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led” (p. 383). This is the presuppositionless demand of hermeneutic phenomenology writ large. The give and take of the researcher and the research subject is a transformative process.

There is an element of play in this dynamic. Gadamer (1960/1999) proposes an understanding of play as an avenue for further revealing the essences of phenomena. The nature of play is a to-and-fro movement between opposing players, “move [and] countermove” (p. 106), a sense of order beyond the participants or agreed upon freedoms and limitations, an arena for the action. Gadamer even ascribes a “sacred seriousness” to play (p. 102). Buber (1923/1958) speaks of this in describing the “give-and-take” of the I-Thou relationship (p. 103). This strikes me as a potential description of a classroom’s atmosphere. Do the teachers or students bring this attitude to the lesson? How does it play out? Teaching sacred text as play is a path worth following. What is the experience of back and forth exchange, strategies and tactics, mutually understood rules, and a field of play in teaching?

The researcher endeavors to understand a topic of interest without prejudice, absent a hypothetical conclusion, yet we bring our preunderstandings to anything by which we are addressed (Gadamer, 1960/1999). The revelation of an unexpected, perhaps uncomfortable, truth attracts further inquiry as we attempt to set those preunderstandings aside. The reflection involved in reliving the experience of teaching sacred literature, too, can be anticipated to leave the individual with a new understanding of their craft, if for no other reason than for the experience of reconsidering past assumptions. This is

“phenomenological human science ... [playing out its] discovery oriented” nature (van Manen, 2003, p. 29).

Throughout this discussion I have referred to what is termed in German “*Erlebnis*,” experience that is lived (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 61). We are to understand that *Erlebnis*, is not quickly forgotten, that time is needed to make sense of experience and that it is in this later process where significance comes to emerge. Gadamer (1960/1999) refers to Simmel in conceiving of the sense of adventure that adheres to experience:

An adventure, however, interrupts the customary course of events, but is positively and significantly related to the context which it interrupts. Thus an adventure lets life be felt as a whole, in its breadth and in its strength. Here lies the fascination of an adventure. It removes the conditions and obligations of everyday life. It ventures out into the uncertain ... Thus the adventure is “undergone,” like a test or trial from which one emerges enriched and more mature. (p. 69)

This incentive as portrayed here energizes this phenomenological study, this investigation into the lived experience of teachers of sacred text. It is the sense of adventure that is experienced by the teacher of sacred text that is being pursued and the narrative that *Erlebnis* makes possible. What is the expected and the unexpected in their teaching lifeworlds? What compels a return to their work year after year, ostensibly teaching the same words that have been taught for thousands of years? What is uncertain and enriching in the experience?

“Being-with” is a characteristic of *Dasein*. As Sartre, perhaps counterintuitively juxtaposes Being against non-Being, Heidegger describes this as independent of the presence of others. This concept of the present or absent “Other” has enormous potential as being a significant issue in the life of a teacher. In contemplating it as an area for

inquiry I imagine this “present-at-hand” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 156) as the lifetime of students taught, supervisors, parents, and students who on a given day may be present or absent.

This *Being-with* has states of being that are guided by “solicitude” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 158). Under this umbrella are covered the whole range of considerateness, opposition, and indifference. It is in this discussion that Heidegger (1927/1962) brings “knowing-oneself” (p. 161) into play. He brings forward such manifestations as “aloofness, hiding oneself away, or putting on a disguise” (p. 161). This construct also holds potential for opening up interesting avenues for discussion with synagogue-school teachers. What is the influence of student attitudes toward the study of sacred text or the teacher advancing a lesson? When does a teacher’s “knowing-oneself” get redefined, and what is the source of that redefinition? What is the teacher’s experience of the “Other”?

Ricoeur (1995) comments on the climate in which this discourse takes place. He writes, “Religious experience comes to language through specific modes of discourse” (p. 39). There are pedantic teachers who conduct a Socratic dialogue, guiding students toward particular interpretations, while others exhibit a greater inclination toward more divergent thinking. What is the religious experience of the teacher pursuing these opposing modes of discourse? Ideally, the experience of teaching sacred literature, and the inverse, studying or learning sacred literature, is equal to the fulfilling of any other *mitzvah*. A problem posed is “the relation between the configuration of the whole literary corpus and what one might correlatively call the space of interpretation opened by all the forms of discourse taken together” (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 39). This is a slightly different take on the climate of discourse. What is the root of the teacher’s “space of interpretation,”

and what are the consequences of the narrowness or expansiveness of this space? Another problem Ricoeur proposes is that of the distance between the biblical world and “our everyday reality” (1995, p. 44). The extent to which this is an issue may be one other element of the classroom climate. What is the *ruach* (spirit) that energizes discourse, channels reflection?

The daily newspapers headline an ongoing clash between secular and religious worldviews. Fueling these conflicts are orthodoxies, the sense that there is one right answer, that “I,” be it an Iranian mullah or an American televangelist, will impose that belief on you. There is barely an acre on earth that is not affected in some way by these tensions. Ricoeur (1995) defines a “properly hermeneutical constitution of faith [as] a constantly renewed interpretation of events of deliverance that open and disclose the utmost possibilities of my own freedom and thus become for me the word of God” (p. 47). How is that region of interpretation defined in the synagogue school classroom? What is the influence?

I-Thou

Buber (1923/1958) contemplates relations between people, formulating what he calls a “twofold attitude [of] I-Thou [or] I-It” (p. 3). This relationship, described as “I become through my relationship to the Thou; as I become I, I say Thou” (p. 11), is echoed in Heidegger, Gadamer and others. Buber’s statement, “All real living is meeting” (p. 11) well describes the lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher. An area I describe as a teacher’s sense of connecting to the past and future is phrased by Buber as, “We live our lives inscrutably included within the streaming mutual life of the universe” (p. 16). This imagery, a stream, includes the sense of continuity. In the Jewish tradition it would

be a linear view, faith handed down from generation to generation. The image is given a different reading in the Hindu faith, where a stream represents the cyclical nature of life, death and reincarnation. The metaphor maintains significance across the cultures and can be compared to the sacred texts that are similarly streamed from generation to generation and reborn as succeeding generations of scribes and printers faithfully replicate the original words. The mutuality that Buber introduces conveys the sense that isolation is asynchronous to relationship, unnatural, and that interdependence better characterizes existence, or in Heidegger's terminology, *Dasein*.

The I-It relationship is one of relating to other as an "object of perception and experience" (Buber, 1923/1958, p. 29). This is further described as "set in space and time" (p. 100). Does this describe the environment of those classes that dismiss precisely at the bell, or that complete the formal expectations of the curriculum? In a more theological statement, Buber describes this way of thinking as "Here world, there God" (p. 79). This investigation is one of relations between teacher, student, and text. A question I ask of that relationship is: In what manner do these different ways of Being in relationship show themselves in the teaching of sacred text? The stream a student represents can be the "eternal Thou ... [and the teacher who] gives his whole being to addressing the Thou of his life, as a Thou that cannot be limited by another, he addresses God" (pp. 75-76). For Buber, God is the "eternal Thou." What is it to have that experience? Is it "the enrapturing dynamic of relation" as Buber describes it (p. 87)? Buber's mystic, Jewish, existentialism brings a unity to the philosophical approach guiding this investigation. His explorations of God are deeply immersed in a pursuit of a unity to all that is, was, and will ever be of existence. At one stage he announces,

“Actually there is no such thing as seeking God, for there is nothing in which He could not be found” (Buber, 1923/1958, p. 80). Being, in Buber’s world, is one of “relation ... meaning ... [and what he phrases as] this life of ours” (p. 110). These themes can be tied to such Jewish conceptions as *B’Tzelem Elohim*, that all people are reflections of God, *Tikkun Olam*, that life has meaning in general and participating in the ongoing act of creation in particular, and *puru urvu*, making sure that there is another generation to carry our values into the future. Relation is reflected on by Heidegger in terms such as Being-with. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach is one that makes meaning of “this life of ours.”

Who Are “They” and What Do They Want from Me?

Teaching is a highly public profession. There is a classroom full of watchful eyes, parents operating just beyond that range, and outside of those boundaries, varying strata of onlookers ranging from extended family, official supervisory personnel, and others who have adopted the Jewish education of young children as a process that compels their interest. This is a face of Heidegger’s “they” (1927/1962, p. 164) who bring their influence to bear on the synagogue-school teacher. He describes this collective as a “dictatorship” and holding “dominion” (p. 164). It is the exposed nature of teaching versus behind the closed classroom door privacy that I would like to explore. As well, I would like to call into question the power of the unidentified “they.” Preliminarily, my personal experience of this commanding force is as an instrument of students, colleagues, and parents in the form of the particularly ethereal conventional wisdom. Indeed, what are the virtual “theys,” as in “they say,” who influence teaching? Do “they” lead to more fulfilling modes of being in the classroom?

“They” is described as being a sly force, possessing “inconspicuousness and unascertainability” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 164). As such, a teacher would have to possess particular character traits to either tune in or tune out this environmental influence. According to Heidegger (1927/1962), its pressure is toward “averageness” (p. 164). In one sense, Heidegger (1927/1962) views this as a force for “leveling down” a drive against the “exceptional” (p. 165). This is perhaps a negative phrasing, “down” having such connotations. To spin this term another way would be the potential to bring an individual up to a community’s standards. This is particularly relevant when considering the culture of a synagogue-school and its support environment. Nonetheless, Heidegger’s (1927/1962) understanding of the influence of “they” is toward suppressing the expression of “everything exceptional” (p. 165). One means toward that end is being “disburdened,” being empowered to support the status quo (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 165). In sum, there is a form of “surrender” in which “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself,” individuality and personal integrity are subsumed into “Being-among-one-another” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 165-166). The countervailing response is to defy the tendency toward “inauthenticity and failure to stand by one’s Self” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 166). This means expressing individuality, “authentic Self” in Heidegger’s (1927/1962) terms, and “find(ing one’s)self” among the environmental forces that push toward assimilation (p. 167), effectively redefining the “they.” Exploring this existential “they” within the context of the synagogue-school teacher’s experience is a quest of this investigation.

In Pursuit of *Shalom*

The Hebrew term *Shalom* is generally translated as peace. Upon further inspection, the derivation of the word is rooted in the concept of wholeness. The relation is described as arriving at a state of peace when there is a sense of wholeness. The antithesis of this attitude is a state of incompleteness. I posit *Shalom* as the equal to what Heidegger (1927/1962) defines as “state-of-mind” and his assignment of this “as a fundamental *existentiale*” (p. 173). In his explication of the concept, the terms become increasingly compatible. How is this state-of-mind/*Shalom* played out in the lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher? Is this experienced in profound or subtle ways?

That Heidegger (1927/1962) grants “mood” the influence of “delivering over in its Being” (p. 173), one anticipates that this is indeed a mighty force. It is in its modes of expression that this power is abundantly appreciated and a considerable presence in the landscape of teaching to be explored. In all its guises, mood may provide a rich territory for examination. Within this region is “fear” as well as “anxiety” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 179). I explore the role fear and anxiety play in the classroom setting as well as invite the introductions of other terms that describe “mood” as experienced by synagogue-school teachers. It is prominent in my mind that the closing verse of the *Shabbat* morning service is “God is with me, I shall not fear” (Harlow, 1985, p. 515).

Understanding and Interpretation

In this process of hermeneutic phenomenology, understanding and interpretation have a relationship of mutuality, “ultimately the same thing,” according to Gadamer (1960/1999, p. 388). It is through interpretation that understanding comes to fruition. The product of interpretation is richer understanding, “the working out of possibilities”

(Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 189). Gadamer (1960/1999) describes this as working toward “seeing connections, and of drawing conclusions” (p. 260). He describes the outcomes as “a state of new intellectual freedom” and “self understanding” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 260). The existentials I present above serve as avenues for revealing the essence of the phenomenon of this study. A phenomenon of interest is to be “understood in terms of a totality of involvements” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 189). I imagine this as one that would encounter a spider web along a path. Contemplated in isolation one would miss its connection to the arachnid that spins it, its role as a tool for catching prey, the biological mechanism that makes it possible, the remarkable system of sticky and non-sticky strands, and a whole host of entanglements. Deeper understanding is an outcome of this interpretive process. Gadamer adds, “Insights are acquired and truths known” (1960/1999, p. xxi).

A question that naturally is provoked by this process is how such connections are derived. The proposition that understanding can be taken many ways implies agreement, an effort to be understood, elements of persuasion and compensation for misunderstanding. In effect, understanding is a form of *logos* (dialogue), involving give and take, and sensitivity to the listener. Gadamer raises a significant issue in this regard. He is attuned to the insider’s propensity for coded, shorthand language, and richness of immediate associations of that clique. In conveying my understanding of this phenomenon I am well warned of this tendency on my part and of my participants. An operating principle Gadamer advances is, “We must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole” (1960/1999, p. 291). It echoes implementing

both deductive and inductive reasoning, as well as the responsibility to create a rich text from which to embark on the interpretive process.

The hermeneutic path introduces a host of responsibilities to the researcher. Since this path requires a disengagement from traditional methodologies, “talents requiring particular finesse of mind” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 307), understanding, interpretation, and application fill that procedural void. A rigor ascribed to this is “uninterrupted listening” (p. 465). Gadamer (1960/1999) speaks to a duality regarding a challenge of scriptural hermeneutics or biblical interpretation. He asks:

Which is the right interpretation of it, the Jewish one or the Christian one in light of the New Testament? Or are both legitimate interpretations ... The Jew who understands the text of the Old Testament in a different way than the Christian shares with him the presumption that he too is concerned with the question of God. At the same time, he will hold that a Christian theologian misunderstands the Old Testament if he takes its truths as qualified by the New Testament. (p. 331)

This is a refinement of Lenny Bruce’s “Jewish and *Goyish*” cited at the beginning of this chapter. Here we are looking at core beliefs on which whole cultures are based and on which worldviews are founded. This is the challenge to believing in a monopoly on truth, that anyone’s interpretation is beyond challenge, and the hubris of asserting such a claim. Perhaps it is the enduring vitality of these religious cultures that exemplifies hermeneutic phenomenology’s challenge to scientific methodology’s truth claims, at least in particular realms of study. The presumption is that “all interpretation is, in fact, speculative” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 473).

Although it is the goal to bracket off one’s “fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception ... an interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, pp. 191-192). It is in recognition of that

possibility that the explorations in Chapter One are present and established as an abiding subtext to this project. Gadamer (1960/1999) says that, “Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter ... Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness” (p. 295). This is the antithesis of a dispassionate, so called “objective” attitude toward the topic.

What are the pre-understandings I bring to this study? What can I do to prevent them from misguiding my investigation? How do I keep them from leading my interpretations astray? They are precisely held in check by exposing them to the light. While the first two chapters have brought my pre-understandings out of the shadows, a summarization of them seems warranted here. I am passionate about Judaism, Jewish education, and consider this work a calling. My attitude toward teaching is scholarly, informed by progressive thinkers. I accept the compromises made by many families to balance Judaism’s demands and the opportunities offered by contemporary American life. I have a vision for non-traditional Judaism’s future and that of the Jewish people in the world. I regard the text we teach as sacred and the opportunity to teach as an honor shared with past and future generations of teachers. I am optimistic. I regard the synagogue as sacred space, and I strive to make my interactions with students as informed by Jewish ethics as the content of the material I convey. This self-reflection, openly stated, is an ontological imperative that functions as a built-in mechanism for maintaining the integrity of this process.

Gadamer (1960/1999) gives a particular insight when he suggests that a tendency toward “discover[ing] typical behavior in one’s fellowmen ... [might lead us to] make

predictions about others on the basis of [our] experience ... [of this] knowledge of human nature” (p. 358). I understand that this represents a significant personal issue, given my many years of teaching and supervising teachers. It is that awareness that can be made into an asset. A guideline he offers is, “to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 361). The phenomenological researcher is, above all “able to listen” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 361).

Seeking Truth

In American society, “truth” has become a debased concept. Even taking the judicial oath to tell the “truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” leaves testimony one more matter of fact to be established. As we follow high profile court cases, we often wonder which witnesses are telling the truth and which ones are committing perjury. This condition is even more pervasive beyond the bounds of sworn testimony. It is almost assumed that politicians are blurring the distinction between fact and fiction. News media are increasingly skewed into misrepresentation, accepting the conciseness of the “sound bite” or press statement as standing in for any honest presentation of reality. This stands in stark contrast to Jewish tradition, which holds an unambiguous template for *emet*, truth. “God is truth” is declared in the daily liturgy (Harlow, 1985, p. 205). While American society has devolved into increasingly low standards for upholding the truth, Judaism and phenomenology prove to be consistent, in this case recognizing that we each hold our own truths. An interpretation of the God idea is that God resides within each of us. Taking this concept one step further, the alloy against which this truth is mediated is a sense of an all-knowing God. Who can brazenly lie to an all-knowing judge?

Heidegger is concerned with the concept of truth. He refers to Aristotle's definition of philosophy as "the science of the 'truth'" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 256). What gives contour to this project is Heidegger's (1927/1962) explication of this understanding in which we are introduced to the idea of making "seen" (p. 256), "taking entities out of their hiddenness and letting them be seen in their unhiddenness (their uncoveredness)" (p. 262), their "disclosedness" (p. 263). This approach is a product of "the intellectual heritage of German classicism," according to Gadamer (1960/1999, p. 9). An illustration of the significance of that genesis of humanism and the importance of language is the terminology that entered consciousness in that time.

Concepts such as "art," "history," "the creative," "worldview," "experience," "genius," "external world," "interiority," "expression," "style," "symbol," which we take to be self-evident, contain a wealth of history. (1960/1999, pp. 9-10)

This gives expression to a new language to describe human experience and serves as a vehicle for "keeping oneself open to what is other—to other, more universal points of view" (1960/1999, p. 17).

What is the truth I seek to disclose and how do I intend to go about that task? It is through hermeneutic phenomenological methodology that I intend to reveal the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting.

Time is the Essence

In Division Two of *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927/1962) discusses the existential issues of time, death and anxiety. There is the idea of "not yet" (p. 286), "ripening" (p. 288), and the constellation of "conscience ... care" (p. 322) and guilt (p. 327). It is my experience that these constructs play a huge role in the life of the synagogue-school teacher and as this study reveals, this phenomenon is better understood

through the discourse around these subject areas. Heidegger speaks of these within the context of death. When he writes, “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die” (p. 289), he speaks of the limits of time in fulfilling our human potential, and, perhaps more accurately, the inevitability for unfulfilled potential. I take liberties with the term to draw the parallel to the end of a lesson or the end of a school year with a certain sense of loss, akin to death. All the potential that was felt at the beginning of the lesson or school year meets a particular finality when the time for dismissal or summer vacation arrives. Attendant to this death, is that constellation of existential concepts just listed. These ideas provoke numerous questions. What is the experience of the limits of time in teaching sacred literature? What provokes a sense of anxiety? How does guilt play a role in our experience of teaching?

A synagogue-school faculty typically represents a wide range of pedagogic philosophies. Among the multitude of influences, some teachers’ methods reflect the academic institution in which they received their training; others reflect the examples they accepted or rejected from the perspective of student, and still others reflect the influence of varying degrees of in-service education. Where Gadamer (1960/1999) introduces a discussion of “fashion (Mode) ... changeable law (modus) within a constant whole of sociable demeanor no other norm than that given by what everybody does” (p. 37), we have an opportunity to explore the nature of teaching style, the opportunities to create one’s pedagogy, and the experience of freedom and limitation in the expression of that form of independence. Is this, as Gadamer proposes, “a special way of knowing” (p. 38), and is it a disconcerting or comforting knowledge? The teacher who brings the profession to whole new levels can be described as “genius:”

Rather, the irrationality of genius brings out one element in the creative production of rules evident in both creator and recipient, namely that there is no other way of grasping the content of a work of art than through the unique form of the work and in the mystery of its impression, which can never be fully expressed by any language. Hence the concept of genius corresponds to what Kant sees as the crucial thing about aesthetic taste, namely that it facilitates the play of one's mental powers, increases the vitality that comes from the harmony between imagination and understanding, and invites one to linger before the beautiful. Genius is ultimately a manifestation of this vivifying spirit for, as opposed to the pedant's rigid adherence to rules, genius exhibits a free sweep of invention and thus the originality that creates new models. (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 53)

Do teachers see themselves as pedants, geniuses or somewhere else along this description's continuum? What is the meditative power that gives the green light or red light to such challenges to conventionality? What is the influence of mediating power on stifling or expressing teaching genius? Consistent with the German classicism that informs this study's attitude, is the recognition of such abstract conceptions in general, and genius in particular, that are beyond the quantitative measure of natural science, but are nonetheless provocative, constructs that are worthy of our attention. A conflict is provoked by our post-Enlightenment society and its rejection of the "claim ... [to] absolute validity" (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 272) of Biblical text. How does this product of the age of reason influence the teacher, her relation to the textual material and the process of conveying that to students who nearly universally live in both the religiously observant world and in secular society?

Death is the antithesis of the "uttermost potentiality-for-Being" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 307). I like to believe that a more familiar outlook for teachers is the opportunity of an open road, a clear path or smooth sailing. This is an attitude that holds that the objectives of the lesson plan or the curriculum will be achieved, that anything can happen along the way, but that whatever occurs further enriches the experience. What is

the sense of anticipation teachers bring to their task? The *Torah* offers the possibility of an ideal world. On the other hand, it does not portray a perfect world. There is cruelty, murder, and evil in many facets. In much of prayer are expressions of awareness of the imperfections in this world. It can be concluded that by definition, the content of the synagogue-school teachers' instruction spans bounds ranging from chaotic and uncertain existence to utopian vision.

A definition offered in this section says, “*Dasein* is essentially being with others” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 281). This description is a prime example of the source of my enthusiasm for hermeneutic phenomenology as a promising vehicle for studying Jewish life in general, and this phenomenon in particular. The value system underlying Jewish culture and society places high priority on community. This understanding of *Dasein* offers great potential for fruitful discussion with teachers. What is the nature of the community formed among students of sacred text? What is the experience of “being-with-others” for the synagogue-school teacher? One of Heidegger’s (1927/1962) comments on history, “that which is past, but which nevertheless is still having effects” (p. 430), also well describes the Jewish people. This sense of temporality highlights the disconnect between our highly attuned relationship with our historical experience and the relatively ahistorical consciousness of the ambient American society in which this evolving narrative is set. That Judaism is a faith handed down from generation to generation, with each succeeding age facing a unique set of challenges, Jewish life also carries another tension Heidegger (1927/1962) describes, “‘epoch-making’, it determines ‘a future’ ‘in the present’” (p. 430).

Gadamer's discussion of language has interesting implications for this study. He writes:

When a person lives in a language, he is filled with the sense of the unsurpassable appropriateness of the words he uses for the subject matter he is talking about. It seems impossible that other words in other languages could name the things equally well. (1960/1999, pp. 401-402)

This strikes me as an accurate portrayal of the work of the synagogue-school teacher of sacred text. The language of instruction is English. In the case of teaching prayer, the language of the material is Hebrew. The problem is given even greater significance in teaching *Torah* where, for the most part, the content is dealt with in translation to English, with Hebrew existing, literally, as parallel text. Questions naturally posed relate to the boundaries and bridges between Hebrew and English and how Gadamer's assertion plays out. The teaching of certain ethical concepts is often an expression of this linguistic dualism. Gadamer (1960/1999) writes:

Thus the verbal event reflects not only what persists but what changes in things. From the way that words change, we can discover the way that customs and values change. (p. 449)

I pursue how the teacher's responsibility to convey values that have survived thousands of years essentially unchanged, are found to retain contemporary relevance. What is the experience of that educational exchange? How, too, does the introduction of more nuanced phraseology, such as developmentally delayed or handicapped, reflect or effect changed thinking? Does the encounter with foreign languages, "extend and enrich" (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 453) consciousness?

The Methodological Guide for the Journey

The text of this study is the narrative spun by those practitioners who teach Jewish sacred text in Conservative movement, synagogue-schools. I chose to focus on a cohort

of eight teachers of third through seventh grade classes from schools in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. Membership in Conservative synagogues is almost equal to that of the other major non-traditional movement, Reform, and far outstrips that of Reconstructionist or traditional, Orthodox congregations. Among the characteristics distinguishing these two majority movements are the Conservative movement's high expectations for Hebrew fluency, familiarity with *Torah* and other sacred texts, and a general expectation for a higher level of religious observance. This statement is best supported by even a casual observation of religious services where the use of English is significantly less in Conservative synagogues, the length of the services and the number of pages read in Hebrew are vastly greater, and the amount of time devoted to the reading of *Torah* significantly more. These aspects all are echoed in the program of studies in their synagogue-schools, which are, at least in part, focused on developing synagogue skills. This is not intended to be a statement of superiority of one movement over another. My intention is to emphasize what is at stake in the success or failure of the Conservative movement synagogue-school as far as students being prepared for participation in the ritual life of their congregations.

The teachers who participated in this study had at least five years of teaching experience in Conservative movement schools, and their subject matter included, in a direct way, sacred text, *tefillah* (prayer) and/or *Torah*. Recognizing the principal as the gatekeeper for access to these schools, it was through their administrator that permission was sought for access to the facility, contact with the faculty, and recommendations for teachers who might best communicate their experiences in synagogue-school teaching. My colleagues were all promptly forthcoming with phone numbers, email addresses, and

street addresses, and filtering the possibilities down to those teachers meeting my years of experience and subject matter criteria. All of the teachers who met those criteria were sent a letter (see Appendix A) inviting them to participate in the study. Although it was my intention to focus on faculty drawn from two long established schools with exceptional reputations, I immediately discovered that between those two schools there were only 14 potential conversants. I was originally undecided about including two other schools, but opted for extending the offer in those directions and was rewarded with four participants in this investigation. In the end, my conversants represented four different schools, one of which was the one I have been directing for the past eighteen years. I had originally planned on six to eight conversants, well in keeping with the practices of hermeneutic phenomenological method which aims at a deep exploration of personal experience, “a conversational relation with the world” (van Manen, 2003, p. 17). Eight teachers responded affirmatively to my letter and each participated in the investigation to its conclusion. I felt honored to have also received three gracious, apologetic, notes declining the offer. The response from all was a sense of opportunity to be a part of a meaningful project.

Data gathering in this mode of inquiry is imprecisely defined (van Manen, 2003). The process I followed included the submission of an essay from my conversants in advance of each of the two individual conversations, classroom observations, and a group conversation which included six of my study participants. At the first conversation participants were asked to sign the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B). Prior to each conversation I asked my participants to send me an essay reflecting on an aspect of their teaching experiences. The first was a reflection on teaching sacred text, the second a

reflection on a particular student connecting with the text. As planned, I met with each teacher twice. These conversations were to be one-two hours long and most took a full two hours. With most of the sessions the conversations continued, at least briefly, after the recording device was turned off. It was my intent that the meetings take place in each teacher's classroom and that was the case for all but four of the conversations; two took place in my office, one in a conversant's office, and one in a synagogue library. In keeping with the philosophy of phenomenology and van Manen's writings on this field of human science, questions are conceived as jumping off points for conversation. Appendix C is a sampling of questions I used to initiate conversation with my participants. The conversations were recorded on a digital voice recorder. This made copying the recordings easy as well as facilitating playback and review. Most of the transcripts were done professionally by companies generally engaged with the legal and medical communities and respected for their discretion regarding confidentiality. Calling on a not particularly well developed skill, I did several of the transcriptions myself. Despite the difficulty, even transcribing a handful of the conversations served to attune me to nuances of conversational speech that are not apparent in typed pages and would not have been noticed if relying on professionally rendered transcripts alone. It was with that lesson in mind that I listened to the recordings as I reviewed the transcripts.

Between the two conversations I observed my participants teaching at least once. "Close observation" is proposed by van Manen (2003) as a means for "generat[ing] different forms of experiential material than we tend to get with the written and the interview approach" (p. 68). He goes on to refer to this researcher role as being a participant-observer, "a gatherer of anecdotes," in my case, entering the lifeworld of the

synagogue-school teacher while mindful of maintaining a “hermeneutic alertness” (p. 69). This later attunement was an added personal challenge, particularly in my first visits, since my professional, supervisory responsibilities tend to call on me to take note of student behavior or to offer suggestions on classroom environment and teacher practice. Some of my conversants even asked me for evaluative judgments afterwards. Some of the teachers introduced me to their classes and told of the reason for my visit while others let me be an anonymous presence. There were a few students who engaged me in conversation and others who, at minimum, made eye contact. I was well schooled as an undergraduate education major in the ability to gather anecdotes and have not neglected the skill in the intervening years. I particularly focused on what the teachers did. I took note of how they circulated around the room and interacted with students, the language they used, and the process with which they conveyed the sacred text that was the content of their instruction. I took contemporaneous notes and then shortly after leaving the classroom reviewed them and filled in details that had been sketchily recorded. These notes then provided jumping off points for our second conversations.

Among the things this entrance into the lifeworld of these teachers allowed me to experience was the influence of students entering and exiting class late or early, the sultry heat that was a factor in one lesson in particular, the generous and sometimes constricting space in which instruction takes place, and the rhythm of the interactions that occur in this micro-climate of the synagogue-school classroom. As referenced earlier, I brought my participant group together for a final conversation guided by themes that surfaced from the previous conversations. With respect for the time demands I was to place on these teachers, I offered to make a donation to their schools in appreciation for their

participation. Those funds are held in escrow until the work of this dissertation is complete.

As predicted, like Odysseus, my research voyage had its share of Circe, Cyclops and Skylla along the way to beguile, wreak, or mislead, but none at a level that I lost my ship or crew. There were the challenges of scheduling conversations with people whose calendars are busy, the occasional cancelled get together, and a dropped appointment. One classroom visit became spontaneous when my appearance on that date was unexpected. Before visiting one of my conversant's class, the principal made a request, which was forthrightly denied, that I share my observations with her because she had been having complaints from parents. After I was on track to have a professional write my transcripts, two of my sessions were declared indecipherable. In one of the recordings my conversant spoke in tones that were a challenge to understand and in the other, the generous sprinkling of Hebrew and Yiddish phrases, was too difficult for the transcriber. I did these two transcripts myself. Van Manen (2003) says that description may "fail to aim at lived experience fail to elucidate the lived meaning of that experience [or] elucidate, but what is elucidated on is not lived experience" (p. 27). I was mindful of this challenge throughout the process and on more than one occasion had to re-direct the conversation back to a description of lived experience. Reaching Ithaca, as a phenomenological researcher, served to reveal "some aspect of the lifeworld [recognizable] as an experience that we have had or could have had" (p. 27). What I pursued in this mode of inquiry was "an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience" (p. 62). In this study it was the lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher and

the experience of teaching sacred literature in that particular setting. As this research process evolved, the text generated brought forth themes that name the essences of this experience.

Reflecting on “essential themes” is a defining characteristic of hermeneutic phenomenological research. It is an exercise in uncovering meaning in lived experience. Van Manen (2003) says,

Phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience. So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience. (p. 79)

The process of exploring the data pool of this research process, conversant essays, observation notes, and transcripts, and allowing structures of meaning to emerge in the reflection, the opening to make sense of the text, is an exercise in “insightful invention, discovery, [and] disclosure” (van Manen, 2003, p. 88). This is aimed at “getting at the meaning of experience” an effort to “touch the core of the notion we are trying to understand” (van Manen, 2003, p. 88). The nitty gritty of thematizing is to interrogate the text, seeking phrases, statements, descriptive passages that “point at ... allude to, or hint at an aspect of the phenomenon” (van Manen, 2003, p. 92-93).

Essences of experience are landscape features created through the thematizing process that is the work of Chapter Four. Lenny Bruce, had he had the rabbinic-scholarly inclination, would have seen this process as Jewish, connecting the manner of sacred text study known by the acronym *Pardes* as virtually the same exercise as phenomenology proposes. Literally, *Pardes* translates as garden or orchard and as an acronym stands for *Peshat*, *Remez*, *Derash* and *Sod*. It rings as an etymological cousin of paradise, the Biblical Garden of Eden. The lush fruit of essays and conversations provided an

opportunity to gain a glimpse of the paradise of a newfound understanding of the teaching of sacred text. Applying the centuries old interpretive process of *Pardes* to thematizing, I looked at the text that is the result of the conversations with my participants and asked:

Peshat – What is the plain basic meaning of the text?

Remez – What is the allegorical or deeper meaning of this text?

Derash – What can be learned from this?

Sod – What is the hidden meaning?

Carrying this approach to its final stage, asking the *Sod* question, what is the hidden or secret meaning, is to pursue what is generally considered to be a mystical, metaphysical understanding. This is the realm of *Kabbalah*, a framework of great contemporary curiosity, noteworthy for its nature as a quest for esoteric knowledge, the inner meaning of *Torah*, and deeper meaning in life. Although this stream of thought is well out of the mainstream of Jewish life and an approach generations of rabbis have cautioned against pursuing, liturgical writings originating in *Kabbalah* have made their way into the most middle-of-the-road *siddurim* (prayer books) used in America. It is in the spirit of this orientation, and a reach for answers to the *Sod* question, that I pursued this investigation. To return to van Manen (2003), thematizing is driven toward, “bringing into nearness that which tends to be obscure, that which tends to evade the intelligibility of our natural attitude of everyday life” (p. 32). This is evidence of a synthesis between an inherently Jewish approach to making meaning of text and that of hermeneutic phenomenology.

In an earlier chapter I reflected on four existentials that may guide the research process. Embarking on this study, my navigational skills carried me through a “dynamic interplay among six research activities,” described by van Manen (2003, pp. 30-31) as:

1. turning to a phenomenon that seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. reflecting on the essential themes that characterize the phenomenon;
4. describing the phenomenon through the act of writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

In the first two chapters, I brought forward the sources of my interest in the subject of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting. These reflections represented a turning to the phenomenon, a corollary that is followed-up by maintaining a thoughtful commitment to that lifeworld which carried through to the final pages of this document and continue to challenge my imagination. Engaging in this investigation has been to return to the original moments of lived experience and passionately pursuing original reflection of embodied Being in time, space, and relation.

Throughout this process thematic elements presented themselves, some as subtly as a 7.8 magnitude earthquake, such as frustration and anxiety, and others, such as beauty and carrying, the mystery as hidden as an agate. Throughout this research, the practice of writing and rewriting toward uncovering understanding of this phenomenon was ongoing to the extent that the “final draft” can only be called that in name. New questions are provoked by the cycle of revisions and new insights. Such is the never closed hermeneutic circle, articulating the unarticulated, a dialogic relationship with the world, suspended within the unsteady balance between part and whole. Sometimes the writing collapsed into a puddle of muddled thought or lead to a conclusionless dead end. Other times it crystallized into passages that energized the next day’s efforts. These false starts, dangling precipices, and flowing streams of thought are part of the experience of a pedagogical relation to the phenomenon. This is the challenge of sustaining an energized

focus in a research environment that can leave the investigator disoriented, lost, and floundering. Van Manen (2003) endeavors to offer his guidelines for phenomenological research without straying into antithetical rigidity. He tries not to offer these “research activities” as procedural steps or a hierarchy. In my research, my experience was that they tended to overlap, blend, and merge into one another. His first point naturally leads to the last, choose a phenomenon that compels personal interest, pursue its essences, explore its meaning, and don’t get lost in the details of the landscape to the point that the power of the grand vista is lost.

Undertaking The Journey

The world of the *Torah* is filled with journeyers. Abraham left Ur for Canaan. Jacob fled Canaan, returned, and later died in Egypt. Generations later, Moses was born in Egypt and led the Israelites on a 40 year sojourn back to the “Promised Land.” These travels represent the early history of Judaism. The documents in which these narratives appear are the foundational literature of this people. Leaving the comfortable confines of settlement has been one of the defining characteristics of the Jewish people. It is the basis for one further coincidence of Heidegger’s thinking and a Jewish worldview:

One must seek a way of casting light on the fundamental question of ontology, and this is the way one must go. Whether this is the only way or even the right one at all, can be decided only after one has gone along it. (1927/1962, p. 487)

A Jewish teaching says, “Yours is not to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it” (*Pirke Avot* 2:21). I feel compelled to undertake this journey, based on thousands of years of history, a personal quest for the meaning of life, and the sense of standing at the confluence of profound forces. There is little doubt that this is a phenomenon that, as van Manen demands, “seriously interests ... [me] and commits ...

[me] to the world” (2003, p. 30). This has been my professional life for almost three decades. My evolution as an educator took a dramatic turn toward more progressive thinking when I began pursuing the course that brought me to writing this dissertation, and an even more radical turn when introduced to phenomenology as a means for researching synagogue school education. Amid the ethical influences propelling me forward, two diametrically opposed Jewish concepts come to consciousness, *Hillul HaShem* (the profanation of the Holy name) and *Kiddush HaShem* (the sanctification of the Holy name). I believe I have the opportunity, obligation, and the tools to cast a light on an insufficiently understood phenomenon. Carrying out this exploration would be an act of *Kiddush HaShem*, a sacred act and a task from which I am not free to desist.

In Chapter Two I referred to an experience of skiing in Utah. The setting was a majestic, snow covered mountain range and a fresh encounter with oxygen thin altitudes. The downhill ascent that lay before me is propelled by an unseen force. I can control the pace, choose the trail, note the details of the terrain, interpret what lies beneath the surface, and how particular features took shape. In my hands is: my awareness of others on the slope, the challenge to see the trees as well as the forest, the moguls and the mountain, and to respond in the moment. With my partner, I reflect on the run after reaching the bottom, reach for a deeper appreciation of what this particular environment has to offer, and look forward to an even more skillful pursuit of the ultimate. This interlude in the study is synonymous. It has been over half a lifetime of academic work preparing me for this mountaintop moment. In the preceding pages I have presented the life experiences that brought me to this study, the philosophic influences that informed my research, and the path blazed by van Manen to enable hermeneutic phenomenology to

be used as a unique perspective through which to research a topic of interest. In Chapter Four, I introduce the conversants who participated in this study and present their lifeworld narrative. It is a phenomenologic explication grounded in their accounts of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting. Pedagogic implications of this study will be presented in Chapter Five. In effect it will be a return to the *Pardes*, asking of the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting:

Peshat – What is the plain basic meaning of this phenomenon?

Remez – What is the allegorical or deeper meaning of this phenomenon?

Derash – What can be learned from this phenomenon?

Sod – What is the hidden meaning of this phenomenon?

I will now say *Shehehyanu*, push off over the edge, and begin the next part of this journey.

CHAPTER FOUR:

BOUNDARIES BREACHED: FACE TO FACE WITH THE KNOWABLE AND THE UNKNOWNABLE

All words of holiness require an invitation. (*Zohar* 43a, 192.1, as cited in Silberman, 1996, p. 89)

This verse has become a mantra guiding my thinking on synagogue-school teaching ever since I first encountered it over a dozen years ago. I invite parents to programs, to help conduct activities, and to join the Religious School faculty. I invite teachers to services, meetings, lectures, lunch, supper or tea in my office. I invite students to classes, services, and what I believe will be the journey of a lifetime. I invite people to make personal meaning of Judaism's sacred texts.

In order to carry out this study I begin with an invitation to participate. I do it somewhat the old fashioned way. I print letters on carefully chosen stationery, fold them properly and put them in envelopes. I see this process as paying heed to the decorum of academic research, as opposed to the casual "Send" of an email or the more direct, almost confrontational, telephone conversation. In reality, there are multiple meanings to this exercise. Stationery is a curious term. The word has its origins in 17th century England as a "stationer," a fixed store (stationary) selling writing goods (*Oxford English Dictionary/OED Online*). In that mercantile society, the connection was to clerks and record keeping. Stationery has retained that meaning while also taking on the more focused sense of the envelopes and papers purchased in such a shop.

Within the context of this study, paper offers a more symbolic connection. Its etymology is from papyrus, a reed that grows along the Nile River in Egypt and which since antiquity was used to make the earliest forms of paper (*OED Online*). Just as the

Biblical narrative tells us that humanity was preserved through the ark that carried Noah, his family, and two of each kind of animal, the Jewish people are redeemed from slavery in Egypt by Moses, whose name means “who was drawn forth from the water” (*Torah, Shemot 2:10*), who also was carried in an ark, made from reeds, in the Nile River. In addition, papyrus is made by laying out the reeds horizontally, then covered with a vertical layer of papyrus. It is flattened, dried under the sun and further flattened (*Encyclopedia Britanica online*). Is there an underlying symbolism to paper through its early ancestor papyrus? It could be said that its integration of the horizontal and the vertical represents the world in which we live and the heavens above, the unseen hand of *Avinu Sh’Bashamayim*, Our Father in Heaven. Papyrus sheets are a synthesis of which the absence of the vertical would cause the dissolution of the horizontal; the pounding, flattening, drying in the sun representative of the Jewish journey through history.

The stationery I send to my potential conversants is a link to antiquity, to the foundation narrative of the sacred text that grounds my investigation. The act of sending off a letter carries elements of religious experience. It requires a leap of faith, an act of sacred trust, and the belief in an unseen human-technical process conveying those envelopes to their separate destinations. These moments, as I stand before the mail clerk, are sacred. I am carrying out a ritual no less religious than sanctifying a meal, practicing textual reading, or preparing for a holiday. I am beginning a new phase of a journey. I say the *shehecheyanu* prayer, a sanctification of a moment in time, and begin the wait for a response from those invited to participate in my research.

I invite you to continue through this chapter as you come in contact with some of the people who are veteran teachers of sacred text in a synagogue-school setting. We

leave behind chapters that laid out the landscape of this unique educational culture, an exploration of what brings me to this study, and the guiding philosophy that shapes the conversations giving form to this chapter. The first chapter of the *Torah* gives an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth. The earth is first described as *tohu va'vohu*, “unformed and void.” As I look at the textual pool created of conversation-transcripts, teacher essays, observation notes, and recordings, I begin to understand that chaotic mass which, according to the Biblical narrative, is set in motion when “God said, ‘Let there be light’” (*Torah, Bereshit* 1:3). When we are said to shed light on a subject, the concept is to bring forward knowledge and understanding. In this chapter, I illuminate the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting.

Chapter Four serves as a rendering of this journey, revisiting the voyage that brought me to this expedition; the phenomenological question originally posed; the potential brought to fruition by the philosophical approach based on the work of Heidegger, van Manen, Levinas and Sartre; and the themes that emerged from this study. A final chapter addresses the pedagogical implications brought to light in this study.

Abraham's Tent

וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פֶּתַח-הָאֹהֶל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם. וַיֵּשָׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וַהֲנֵה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים
 נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיֵּרָץ לִקְרָאתָם מִפֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ אֶרְצָה. וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי
 אֱלֹהִים מִצְאָתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל-נָא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עַבְדְּךָ. יִקַּח-נָא מֵעֵט-בָּמִים וְרַחֲצוּ
 רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁעֲנוּ תַחַת הָעֵץ. וְאָקַחָה פֶת-לֶחֶם וְסַעְדֵי לְבָבְכֶם אַחֵר תַּעֲבֹרוּ
 כִּי-עַל-כֵּן עָבַרְתֶּם עַל-עַבְדְּכֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹן תַעֲשֶׂה כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ.
 (בראשית יח:א-ה)

[Abraham] was sitting at the entrance of his tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground, he said, “My lords, if it please you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then go on—seeing that you have come your servant’s way.” They replied, “Do as you have said.” (*Torah, Bereshit* 18:1-5)

These five verses of the *Torah* are the inspiration of *midrashic* narratives, story collections, interfaith dialogue, and coalitions working for peace in the world. A *mitzvah* that derives from this text is *hachnasat orchim*, the welcoming of guests. The *Torah* text goes on that the men are not random passers-by, but angels, messengers, sent to tell the “advanced in years,” childless couple Abraham and, his wife, Sarah, that they shall, within the year, “have a son!” (*Torah, Bereshit* 18:10).

The “child” I have long awaited is to be the fruit of various conversations, transcripts, essays, classroom visits and classroom artifacts. Over time, eight teachers choose not to “go on past (this) servant.” They come from four different Conservative synagogues in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. Most of them respond to my invitation by email. A few casually and directly tell me that they would be willing to be a part of my study. Over the course of several months, culminating in a gathering of five of the participants, we explore the lived experience of teaching sacred literature in a synagogue-school setting. My conversants are introduced through their words to students of which I take note when a visitor to their classrooms, and they are identified by pseudonyms.

Lily

It is a Sunday morning and Lily’s third graders are learning about *Tu B’Shtat*, the New Year of the Trees. The discussion is about different ways of classifying fruit and how those categories represent different kinds of people.

Josh is describing the three different kinds of fruit, “There are fruits that you get rid of the outside and eat the inside, some you eat the outside and throw away the inside and others that you eat the whole thing.” The students spend the next few minutes drawing the fruit that they think represents them. In the process, the children chat among themselves, and comment on each other’s works in progress.

Concluding the lesson Lily has the children tell each other the fruit they drew and how they are like that fruit. She tells them, “I’m very interested in learning what you guys have to say.” The children relate how they are like, “a cherry,” “a cranberry,” “a green apple,” and “a grape.” This later answer prompts Lily to ask, “Do you like to hang on the same stem with your friends?” She tells Rachel, “You have such interesting things to say.”

There is much to say about the flow of the lesson, the interactions between the students and their teacher, and the sense that knowledge is a two-way stream. This session is rooted in a holiday dating to Biblical Israel, conceptually refined in the Talmud and given contemporary meaning, in this case making the leap from trees, to fruit, to the kind of people we are. Lily, telling her children, “I’m very interested in learning what you guys have to say,” communicates a relationship of mutuality and empowers students to believe that their thoughts are valued contributions to advancing understanding of the world. She has known some of her students for four years, having first taught them when they were preschoolers. She is a member of the congregation in which she teaches, and her work is an expression of sharing in the synagogue community’s responsibility “to educate its children [and] ... being part of the community.” She also works with a group of teenage girls, a project that leads her to reflect on her own adolescence and contemplate what is in the near future for her pre-teen daughter. That is close to her first days as a synagogue-school teacher, “If you count the years of assistant teaching when I was in high school... the total is somewhere around 22-25 years.” Lily creates an environment, facilitates activities in which children can explore their relationship with society, and she can be enriched by their insights.

Janet

Among the subjects she teaches her third graders, *Torah* is what Janet most enjoys. Her class is displaying their knowledge enthusiastically of the stories of the first

Jewish families: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob, Leah, and Rachel. Over the course of an hour the students review previous stories as a set up for the day's text, which, in the *Torah*, spans almost two months worth of weekly portions. At one point she asks the class, "If you had to think about *Shalom Bayit* [peace in the house], do we see it in the story of Jacob and Esau?" As the lesson proceeds, she provokes the children to consider an unusual perspective on the conflict between the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, asking the class to "tell the story from Esau's point of view." "What did Esau give up?" "Why did Rebecca favor Jacob?" "How many of you think Isaac was tricked?" She guides the children to understanding the subtleties of underlying ethics present in the Biblical narrative by asking leading questions. Over the course of less than a decade she has made a transition from being the mother of three children in the synagogue-school to seeing her youngest about to go to university as she establishes herself as a member of that school's faculty. Her childhood love for sacred text and the experience of winning a Bible knowledge competition are influences on what has been a career transition from physical therapist to synagogue-school teacher.

Terry

On this particular, early spring day the Washington area is experiencing a heat wave. It is not quite time for thermostats to be changed over to air conditioning. As a result, Terry's classroom is uncomfortably hot. In addition, because of a professional day in the local school system, this class redirected the children from a lazy day of few responsibilities into the structure of an academic lesson.

One student's behavior prompts Terry to say, "I realize you don't want to be here because you had the day off." She proceeds to lead the class through their repertoire of prayers: *Modeh Ani*; *Mah Tovu* ... She asks, "What are we talking about here?; *La'asok b'divrei Torah*, What are we thanking God for?" At about

the point some energy is building in the room, the liturgical chanting becomes more robust, she comments, “You are learning this so when you are praying, it isn’t just like saying bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla. We are only up to page 38. We are not doing well today.” The class progresses in *Birkot HaShachar*, their reading-chanting punctuated by the comprehension questions of key words, “What is *Horin*?” “What is *matir asurim*?”

Terry is experiencing the challenges of time. In the hour planned for the lesson, they have only progressed “to page 38.” The public school calendar makes her task more difficult. This hot March day also conspires to make the encounter with teaching sacred text, *tefillah* (Jewish prayer), an uphill climb. “Bla, bla, bla, bla, bla bla bla,” represents the antithesis of what she wants to achieve. She has complete confidence in her children’s ability to master the mechanical skill of chanting the Hebrew words. She steadfastly pursues getting her students to comprehend and appreciate the message in that ancient, foreign language. Terry sees her mission as

Giving a focus to the children that will help them build a stronger self and not just the stronger Jewish identity, but a stronger human identity ... human kindness, that is what God wants of us and that is what God asks of us and humanity finds it is very difficult.

Terry has been teaching for more than 20 years and says of her present class that she has “not had this bright of a group of children in six years.” Their questioning of the premises she teaches, above all the existence of God, she describes as “heart-wrenching...almost like a lawyer in front of a judge.”

Lynn

The background I have been given on this class is that they are smart kids who have fallen behind in their Hebrew reading skills for a broad spectrum of reasons. Among those circumstances, there are too many absences in previous years and a variety of learning disabilities. She has fifth and sixth grade classes.

The students are making a transition from hearing from a visitor to their school to a lesson on the *Haggadah*, readings for the Passover celebration. Lynn tells the class, “We are going to try to stay controlled.” She goes on to start the lesson asking for a volunteer to “Explain to the people who were not here on Sunday (what the handout is about).” A student says, “It is the order of the *Seder*.” Lynn says, “*Seder* means order. What does *siddur* mean?” A student, Adam, asks about the possibility of reading the books of the *Torah* out of order. This question prompts a classmate to say, “I would like to slap him.” Students take turns reading the terms for each part of the *Seder*, “*Kadesh, Urchatz ...*” The reading is slow, halting. Over the course of the lesson the class progresses to the *seder* plate, identifying the symbolic items that go on it. The students respond to questions along the way, “What does *afikoman* mean?” “Why do you think *matzah* for dessert?” “Why a green vegetable?” The lesson ends with Lynn asking, “How much better did you read it today?”

Lynn is engaged in preparing her class for Passover, the holiday celebrating the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt, a journey from slavery to freedom. Observance of the festival is a *mitzvah*, “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread” (*Torah, Shemot* 12:15). Digressions from the topic of a lesson, such as the question about reading the books of the *Torah* out of order, and the balance between a superficial understanding of a tradition or ritual and deep exploration of a particular aspect of the topic at hand, define the decisions she makes in her preparation and conduct of the lesson. How is the traverse of a lesson a continuous series of crossroads, decisions toward a differently defined objective? With her focus on developing fluency in Hebrew reading, her closing question encourages the students to reflect on the progress they are making on the underlying goal they pursue. After teaching special needs classes for “twelve or thirteen years,” where exploring the study of prayer beyond “a very concrete level...you sort of got into hot water because images and analogies, that kind of thing, was not something they could accept,” she is teaching a class of “good thinkers ... capable kids.” This progression reflects her personal, spiritual journey. As a child, “I was at Temple Israel, in Great Neck” (Long Island, New York) which she describes as having “a very good Hebrew

school [where] it wasn't your personal interpretation that was important, but somebody else with authority would have to tell you what a prayer meant." With her current class, Lynn accesses personal experience with prayer when she says, "They really have to have some idea of what they are saying, because they are too smart, they are too smart to not have an idea [of what the Hebrew says] ... We don't want to be praying things that we have no meaning for. That's not meaningful." Her beginning with this group set the development of a technical skill, Hebrew reading, as the purpose of the class. She brings to this responsibility her personal experience with meaningless rote learning, a commitment to her own Jewish learning as part of the congregation in which she teaches, and an attunement to the needs of her students. This leads her to pursue a second pedagogic mandate, the development of her students' personal connection to sacred text.

Michelle

In this lively fifth grade class,

A girl leads the class in *Ashrei*, a challenging prayer which in some synagogues, this one included, the verses are read alternately between a leader and the congregation. The children progress through the afternoon service and, at one transition jump pages ahead to the ritual of "Counting the Omer." Before reading the special prayer, Michelle asks the class, "How do *brachot* begin?" Children answer as a group, "*Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloheinu, Melech HaOlam* (Praised are You, God, Ruler of the Universe)." She then asks, "How do *brachot* for a *mitzvah* begin?" and they answer adding the words to the formula, "*asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu* (who has sanctified us through *mitzvot*/commandments and commanded us)." They read the prayer that ends, "*al sfirat HaOmer* (for the Counting of the Omer)." She then says, "Nicely done, ladies and gentlemen."

In Michelle's class the sacred text of the *siddur* is, in turns, the content of instruction and a vehicle for a higher order of learning, leadership development and community building. The girl leading *Ashrei* has given Michelle the satisfaction of

having successfully taught this difficult Psalm. “Nicely done,” is as much an expression of self-congratulation as it is praise for the student. It is one level of success that children can chant the prayer and another level when they stand in front of a group and lead it. The service with which she begins her class is a microcosm of the congregational service the children will participate in a few years down the road. The distinction she makes between *brachot* and *brachot* for a *mitzvah* is Michelle’s pointing out that reading this particular passage is part of the fulfillment of a *mitzvah*. Among my eight conversants, Michelle is one of the only ones (Rachel is the other) who affiliates with an Orthodox congregation. That she has chosen to integrate into her lessons the ritual of counting the omer gives evidence of two radical connections, on her part, to sacred text. One is based on the connection to time; this is a prayer that is only said in the 49 days between *Pesach* and *Shavuot*. Blu Greenberg writes:

Jews have an amazing way with time. We create islands of time. Rope it off. Isolate it. Put it on another plane. In doing so, we create within that time a special aura around our everyday existence. (as cited in Elkins, 1999, p. 83)

What makes this particularly remarkable is that until the Jewish feminist movement of the 1970s began to challenge assumptions of women’s roles within the Orthodox community, women, based on the Talmudic verse, “All affirmative precepts limited to time men are liable and women are exempt” (*Kiddushin* 29a), would not have had the obligation to fulfill this *mitzvah* and would not have experienced what Greenberg called “a special aura.” Adler (1973), in her feminist critique of traditional Judaism cites the Talmudic verse above and terms women’s status within the religious community as “peripheral” (p. 77), and that following the phrasing of this *halacha* “the characteristic posture of their [women’s] Judaism is negation rather than affirmation” (p. 78). Michelle

is the embodied spirit of Orthodoxy's confrontation with the American *zeitgeist*, as well as Conservative Judaism's principle of "Tradition and Change," an embracing of the tension between Talmudic law and modernity. How does the synagogue-school teacher experience the convergence of past, present, and future in moments of classroom time? In a compact time frame, Michelle is guiding her class through a meaningful expression of sacred ritual and preparing her children to assume an ever evolving adult role in the community.

Joyce

Over the course of the first 30 minutes of class, most of the students enter Joyce's terrace level classroom. One or two children are in the room before the official start time, a few others just after that time, and the last arrives almost 60 minutes into the session. The lesson continues uninterrupted, the late arrivals quietly taking their seats, and joining the flow of the lesson. At one point Joyce reminds the students that on the upcoming *Shabbat* they will be called to the bema to lead *Kiddush*, the prayer sanctifying the wine, and begins with a verse from the *Torah*, "*V'Shamru B'nei Yisrael et HaShabbat*" (And the Children of Israel will keep the *Shabbat*). The children assemble in the front of the room and chant the prayer, competently, and with a level of enthusiasm and energy that prompts Joyce to say, "Let's hear you excited about *Shabbat*," at which time the class gives the review a second pass, this one with more gusto.

What drives the synagogue-school teacher to teach in this particular educational setting? It is abundantly clear that Joyce has an enthusiastic passion for both her subject and her students. There are many signs of mutual respect, from the polite late entrances, to the response to questions, to the redirecting toward the emotion that should accompany

the leading of a congregation in prayer, even in rehearsal mode. A person has to live the experience of being “excited about *Shabbat*,” to access that as a focus for her children’s energy. Although it cuts to the core of what should be taught about *Shabbat*, it is not the kind of objective one would find in a “Teachers Guide.” Joyce lives the material she teaches her seventh graders. She is a regular participant in *Shabbat* services in the synagogue at which she is both teacher and congregant. She teaches *tefillah* and one of her goals is for her students to develop “lifetime Jewish skills [which include] knowing the *Amidah* ... (the series of 19 prayers traditionally recited three times daily) and feeling comfortable with it.” “One of my greatest experiences ... [at a] *shiva minyan* (the quorum for a service at a house of mourning through which it is made possible for mourners to say the mourning prayers) [was] a young man that I completely didn’t recognize ... came up to me and he said, ‘I hated it when you made me learn it [the *Amidah*], but now I’m glad.’” She has been teaching in this community long enough that, “The earliest students I had are probably just now having children of their own ... [or] getting to the point ... where they’re going to be sending their kids to Hebrew school.” The influence she has had on her community is on display in the now adult, former students participating in the life of the congregation, and, perhaps on occasion, being that necessary, tenth adult to make a *shiva minyan*.

Steven

Steven leaves his day job as a travel agent in an office just over 25 miles away from the synagogue to teach this two-hour, Tuesday afternoon seventh grade class. In suburban Washington, DC, the commute is unpredictable at any time of the day. He arrives early, on time, late, but only rarely missing a day, always ready to teach, week

after week, year-after-year, for twelve years now in this school. He happens to piggyback this lesson with a two-hour evening class, just as he combines it on Wednesdays with tutoring pre-adolescents for the celebration of their *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. On this day Steven is teaching about the “Counting of the Omer,” the same ritual Michelle is teaching. He describes an aspect of this tradition as “each week improving in certain ways.” At one point in the lesson he poses the question, “Why should we be excited about *Shavuot*?” He shares with the students his understanding that it is an “underestimated holiday [of which] most people are unaware of its importance.” He passes out a worksheet and sets the students to work in twosomes and threesomes.

As Steven circulates around the room looking in on the students’ progress, I make my way around the room. Some girls are talking, pencils down, and their page blank. Other students have filled in the spaces with insightful comments, while others’ notations seem superficial or silly. As Steven calls the class to attention and begins a discussion based on their work, the exchange of ideas is punctuated with: children calling out answers, some non-sequiturs; side conversations having nothing to do with the topic at hand; and an occasional insult. To the question, “What are things you count,” an answer was, “the number of times Sam says something stupid.” Steven redirects the students to the topic, pointing out what he expected them to come up with: “weight, pounds, ounces, calories; height, feet, inches... We have the expression, ‘Count your blessings.’” He wraps up the lesson returning to the themes of counting and numbers and how “important they are in Jewish life.” He points out the song, “Who Knows One?” as an example. A student replies, “One is God.” Another student, recalling a past experience, starts joyfully singing, “One is *HaShem*, One is *HaShem*, One is *HaShem*.” What is it like to have the

class on the verge of chaos, in effect constantly leaving the trail, switching back and forth between disregard for the material and demonstrating emotional connection?

Steven is at ease in this frenetic environment. He sees in Jewish tradition ways of being in which students should be “excited.” He looks at a curricular topic and finds an angle that will be meaningful to his pre-adolescent students. Where one teacher focuses on the *mitzvah* of counting, he develops the theme of self-improvement. This idea of being attuned, annually, for a seven-week period, on directing our energies toward personal growth is a gift he brings to his students. It is deeply meaningful to him. He lives the sacred time of the Jewish calendar, wears a *kippa* because he is aware of being in a sacred space, and demonstrates respect for every student, a sacred relationship, based on an ethic of how to regard all people that is the title of a tenth grade class he teaches, *B’Tzelem Elohim*, In the Image of God. Within the framework of Conservative Judaism, he is highly observant of Jewish tradition.

As a sideline, Steven writes and decorates *ketubot* (marriage contracts), a centuries old art form. Like the scribes who write *Torah* scrolls immerse themselves spiritually in their work and lead lives guided by a respect for *halacha* (Jewish law), he, too, acts in this spirit. In our conversations, Steven conveys a sense of awe toward the sacred text he teaches, an appreciation for his students, and an excitement for the unleashing of forces when the two are brought together. There is the sense that his students, those in his classroom today and those who were on his roster twelve years ago, are ever present. His drive is for each student to “get it,” that is, to grasp the interpreted hermeneutically derived messages, the great potential, and the wisdom of the *Torah*.

Rachel

I enter a classroom full of seventh grade children. Every seat is taken and students are sitting on the floor. With some enthusiasm students are singing, *Etz Hayim Hee*, the Aleph-Bet Song and *Henei Mah Tov*. A girl suggests the class sing the later as a round. Affirming the suggestion, Rachel tells the slightly unruly class, “Either we do this quickly or we don’t have time.” How are the limits of time an ever present reality in the synagogue-school classroom? A few minutes later her co-teacher takes half the class away and 11 children are left behind. As students gather around Rachel to get materials, turn in essays, and get her opinion on their work, she is noticeably looking up as most of the students are taller than her. In conversation she tells me, “I have these boys who are 20 feet taller than me, I have to remember they are 12. Even though you want to treat them older ... you have to kind of remember that sometimes, and it is hard to not automatically expect a higher level of responsibility or behavior or anything, maturity, just because they are huge.” How is physical being a part of this lived experience? The students quickly settle on their tasks, all directed toward a program the class will lead for the community. Some students are working on the program cover. Among her instructions, “Remember, this is not sunshine and happy. It is for *Yom HaShoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day).”

Rachel is an unintentional synagogue-school teacher. Her transition from school secretary to teacher is a long-ago career change, the product of a resourceful education director offering her a new role in the school. Rachel is traditional in her level of Jewish observance. What is it like to live and teach a level of religious practice that is significantly different from that which the students observe? This slice of classroom life

demonstrates the input children have in shaping their educational experience. They suggest songs and versions of those selections. The teacher balances competing interests, student enthusiasm, initiative, planned material, and the ever present limits-of-time. *Henei Mah Tov*, a song based on a verse from the Bible set to a contemporary melody, and the essays bring enthusiasm and respect for the role students are to play in honoring a contemporary addition to the Jewish calendar, *Yom HaShoah*.

This is our entry point to the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting of eight individuals. They represent four different Conservative congregations in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. It is particularly fitting that essays and conversations are the fundamental textual gathering activities for this project. As I cyclically review progress reports for my school, the “Teacher Comments” sections constantly refer to the students’ participation, enthusiasm, and contributions to “discussions.” It is discourse rooted in sacred teachings that best defines the lived experience of the synagogue-school teacher.

In our conversations, themes quickly emerge that illustrate the essence of what it means to have ancient, sacred text as the content of instruction and the experience of teaching such material in 21st century America. These conversations are laced with the passion, connection, holiness, frustration, spirituality, cynicism, and righteousness these eight individuals bring to their tasks. These essences reveal the hidden aspects of this phenomenon. Throughout the process I pursue these questions: What does it mean to be a synagogue-school teacher? What is the meaning of sacred? When have you felt a sense of the sacred? What is it like to teach material that, according to Jewish tradition, is the word of God? What is the experience of religious observance in relation to the text’s

message, the teacher's adherence to those teachings, and the students' personal practices? What is it like to teach concepts, value terms, and language that are rooted in the ancient world?

As I proceed into the lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher it is the fundamental nature of that lived experience I bring forward. Van Manen writes of bringing a "phenomenological sensitivity" (2003, p. 2) to this research approach, that is, an interpretive mode. Heidegger (1927/1962) describes phenomenology as, "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (p. 58). Speaking to the ethics and morals of the interactions that define my phenomenon, Levinas (1961/1979) says:

A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the other ... the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. (p. 43)

This outlook is a narrative guide to the investigation of classroom visits, conversations, essays and other forms of text gathering.

Coming Face to Face

וְלֹא-קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ י פָּנִים אֶל-פָּנִים (דברים לד:י)

And there has not risen a prophet in Israel like Moses,
whom God knew face to face. (*Torah, Devarim* 34:10)

In the last chapter of the *Torah* is found the above description of the relationship between the prophet, Moses, and God as "face to face." Thousands of years later, Levinas (1961/1979) echoes this saying, "Reflection can, to be sure, become aware of this face to face, but the 'unnatural' position of reflection is not an accident in the life of consciousness. It involves a calling into question of oneself, a critical attitude which is

produced in the face of the other and under his authority” (p. 81). Up to this point in the *Torah’s* narrative, Moses dodges the forces that would have prevented him from reaching maturity. He is born at a time that a Pharonic decree calls for killing male children at birth, but is hidden away. He is floated in an ark on the Nile and is spotted and saved. He is raised as an Egyptian prince, gets into trouble, and flees into the wilderness. It is when he turns to face the “Burning Bush” that he comes into a face to face relationship with God, a relationship that calls him to take responsibility for his enslaved kinfolk in Egypt to rise to a level of accomplishment to which he could not conceive himself competent.

In the spirit of *B’Tzelem Elohim*, that all people are created in the image of God, this is a model that Levinas recognizes, that there is an irrefutable, ethical dimension to our interactions. Entering into the face to face is the turning point, a defining moment. From its opening verses to these closing sentences, the *Torah’s* narrative is one of personal relationships. Besides the interaction between Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, and Joseph and his brothers, are the infinitely more supercharged dialogues between God and a variety of interlocutors, including Adam, Cain, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. In all of these encounters there is a broad spectrum of interaction, including disagreement and agreement, the give and take of negotiation, expressions of condemnation and words of praise. That the *Torah* closes on this particular note, the last word, so to speak, that of all interpersonal relationships, a “face to face” one is the most extraordinary, can be interpreted as expressing the primacy of direct, unmediated contact. What are the face to face encounters that define the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting? How is this existential, lived relationship, an essential feature of the synagogue-school landscape?

Landscape, according to Greene (1978), is that ground on which we live our relationships. They can be robust relationships defined by “attentiveness ... interest in things [or the] bland conventionality and indifference so characteristic of our time” (p. 42). My conversants are both the agents and the faces of Judaism’s sacred texts, a body of literature intended to, “make it possible to come in contact with ourselves, to recover a lost spontaneity” (Greene, 1978, p. 2). Furthermore, they are charged with bringing about engagement with sacred texts that are in sync with Greene’s call for “transcendence,” which she defines as sensitivity to others, leading a moral life, and “wide-awakeness” (1978, p. 2).

As I further explore this lived experience it can be seen that the educational landscape of the synagogue-school is rarely the artificial, painted backdrop to a stage behind actors reciting their lines, but more consistently a challenging, real life environment in which the improvisational narrative of this educational niche unfolds. While Greene writes of an unfulfilled praxis, an educational landscape that has not come to be for public schools, my experience with these conversants is that her vision has come to fruition in the synagogue-school. This circumstance poses a certain existential crisis. What is school? Is it that institution in which secular studies are pursued as a run-up to university and the work world, or the one in which Judaism is the *raison d’être* of its being? Critical for Greene, “is that we, as conscious beings, constitute the world we inhabit through the interpretations we adopt or make for ourselves” (1978, p. 17). This is a sub-text to the lifeworld of the synagogue-school and the sacred text studied there. The approach is the ancestor of Greene’s arts and humanities orientation and is the effort pursued passionately of making a synthesis between sacred text and lived experience.

Pursuing this synthesis is facilitated through the face to face exchange Heidegger (1927/1962) calls *logos*, a key term in his phenomenology. While *phenomenon* is the entity that calls for our attention, *logos*, is defined initially as “discourse” (p. 55). He demonstrates unease with his rendering of the term, at one point considering his explanation inadequate and sweeping. Just as my conversants confront the limits of translation, Heidegger (1927/1962) lays out a series of alternative translations-interpretations for *logos*: “reason,” “judgment,” “concept,” “definition,” “ground,” or “relationship,” conferring on them a less than satisfactory, assailable validity (p. 55). In relation to the Greek concept of truth, a compound word bringing together “not” with “escaping notice,” he more adroitly takes on this semantic obstacle refining the understanding of *logos* as the “function of ... letting entities be perceived” (p. 58). It is through this etymology that *logos* is recognized as a process of discovery, truth finding, revealing what is hidden, and not letting a phenomenon escape notice. This connects with Greene’s (1978) “concern ... with a disclosure of the world, a clarification of what it means to be” (p. 17). *Logos* relates to this study on several levels including its role in the investigative process, as well as its pedagogic function in the classroom. *Logos* is a direct face to face relationship.

As “discourse,” *logos* is a broad, yet revealing turn of phrase. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, discourse is a murky mix of an “onward course,” armed conflict, “the act of understanding,” “talk, conversation,” “narration,” and “a spoken or written treatment of a subject” (*OED Online*). My conversations carry elements of these terms, with the armed conflict aspect only following the traditional Jewish understanding that words can be more dangerous than a hand-held weapon. As tears flowed at times, not

blood, a box of tissues stood in for bandages, and painful recollections for wounds.

Usually, our discourse carried the flow of an “onward course,” ranging from narration to the give and take of conversation. In the end, Heidegger’s description of *logos* as “relatedness ... relation and relationship” (1927/1962, p. 58) has particular resonance. In this later sense, *logos* is both an avenue to understanding the lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher and an essential aspect of that lived experience. As we proceed, we come into face to face relationship with this landscape. O’Donohue (1999) writes, “Landscape and nature know us and the returning echo seems to confirm that we belong here” (p. xxi). As I proceed, I explore the nature of that confirming echo.

Seeing The Big Picture

Lily gives insight into multiple dimensions of *logos* defining her lifeworld:

I don’t consider myself to be, this pillar of ... Judaic, anything, really. And I don’t want to be looked at that way by my students. But, I know that that’s probably what happens because of the nature of the relationship, that they come to learn things about Judaism from me. So, it’s just the nature of the relationship; that they’re going to put me in that kind of position. But, it can be very uncomfortable. I don’t want them to think, because, you went to McDonald’s last night for dinner ... I think any less of you. I mean, I think I do a pretty good job of avoiding it in most circumstances because I don’t want to say that it’s okay to have that bacon cheeseburger either. I mean, I always kind of avoid it, whenever possible.

Despite her desire, Lily’s position defines her as representing the authoritative voice of Jewish law. Her reference to “that bacon cheeseburger,” is not an abstract grab at hyperbole. It is not only the reality, but it is an example of a highly saturated, culturally gross, repudiation of two almost universally understood Jewish dietary laws, the prohibition on pork and that against mixing milk and meat. The bacon cheeseburger is quicksand threatening the onward course of the synagogue-school lesson. Step in it and an aspect of Jewish identity will be pulled under the surface. Among the possibilities,

Lily can set up a warning sign, sidestep it for someone else to deal with, or step into a direct confrontation. With children regarding her as a “pillar” of Jewish observance, this dietary choice influences the relationship, adds a dimension to the classroom. The relationship is a nuanced balancing act, like driving along a dangerous, narrow, winding, unpaved road. There is what she does not want students to think, but which they veer toward imagining. She does not want to point this out explicitly, and tries to avoid doing so. A quality of the relationship is the interaction with what Lily represents, real or imagined. This is a value of the engagement, teacher as symbolic representation of an ideal. Like kissing a fallen sacred book, there is no need to state the *halacha* (Jewish law) or *minhag* (traditional practice); even to these third graders it is well known, a lesson learned upstream.

Lily comes face to face with a disconcerting aspect of the synagogue-school educational landscape, a dissonance between the expectations a teacher would entertain of someone who has chosen to affiliate with a Conservative congregation, an unsettling reality for at least a segment of that population, the curriculum she teaches, and her own level of practice. This is an encounter with Greene’s (1978) “bland conventionality and indifference so characteristic of our time” (p. 42). Lily is like a nature society activist catching poachers in the act of carting away the remains of an endangered species. The indifference arises from a contradiction between assimilation into American society and a religious tradition that has made extraordinary contributions to human society over the course of thousands of years, abandoning it to the blandest of conventionality, fast food. She is face-to face with a *logos*-as-truth, not escaping notice. Is Judaism the endangered species challenging her activist passion? She is engaged in an interstitial discourse

between the landscape some of her students inhabit, the way they have chosen to constitute their world, and her sense of the sacred:

Longevity in history ... they [the children] don't live in vacuum ... there's a big foundation out there for them to rest upon ... that's what I enjoy about putting out there ... that they can find little pieces of themselves all over these last five thousand years ... I hope that gives them stability. (Lily)

Where does the face to face with the bacon cheeseburger leave Lily? Greene (1995) speaks of "the strivings of other teachers and teacher educators who are weary of being clerks or technocrats and equally weary of that sad opaqueness of a private life centered about nothing but itself" (p. 2). Had Lily not long ago stepped away from the wearying potential of teaching and made space for her striving she would likely have moved onto another pursuit. Transcendence is also part of her Being as synagogue-school teacher, which to her means:

Being part of a community ... this is my community and I'm responsible for it in several ways ... both by going to *shul* on Shabbat and teaching my children this ... I feel that it's an important thing for a synagogue to have a school to educate its children and if I'm able and willing then I ... it's a responsibility of mine to do that ... I guess I also feel like, yeah it's about responsibility. I think that I feel there is responsibility on me, personally to ... to teach the important things to kids, because I'm not sure they'll get it otherwise.

Teaching is an aspect of the moral life Lily has chosen for herself. In her Being can be seen the potential for what Greene (1978) describes as, "teachers [who] identify themselves as moral beings, concerned with defining their own life purposes in a way that arouses others to do the same" (p. 51). She is "wide-awake," as Greene (1978) terms it, to the unique potential she has to provoke people to ask personally reflective questions and to "make the conscious endeavors needed to elevate their lives" (p. 52). She lives a broad range of sensitivity to the world around her and to others. The reasoning that led her to sidestep the quicksand in her path, did not force a choice on the children to judge

their parents, or impose her judgment on their eating habits. Her awareness of the dynamics at play allows her to carry out the conscious act of constituting a world of personal meaning from her lived experience, one that leads her to resolve to continue teaching, “Just when I was ready to retire.”

Steven’s attitude toward his teaching is much like a comedian’s relationship to the world. He sees humor in the human condition and gives that spin to many of his narratives. More poignantly, the day to day of life is perceived as the raw material for his teaching. For the comic, the world is material for making people laugh. For Steven, the world, shared experience, and laughter are tools for making his students relate to the world with a Jewish soul. His take on the source of children’s understanding the *Torah* as a sacred text is described in this way:

I see that when little kids, three or four-years-old ... walk into the *Shul* and they go to tot *Shabbat* or wherever ... they’re going to get one of those stupid little puffy *Torahs* with a smiley face on it. And the first thing they’re going to learn in the first week or maybe the first month is that that’s a very special thing and this book is very special, you know, they kiss the book when it falls ... and then there’s the big *Torah* and the ark ... And from like the moment they have any consciousness of being in *Shul*, they’re aware that there is something really special about it. They don’t know why necessarily or what it is and I guess there are many of us who never will. But they know that ... they have to treat it in a different way than anything else.

There is a scene in the 1979 Mel Brooks film, “The Frisco Kid,” in which, Avram, a Polish rabbi, making his way across the 19th century “Wild West” to San Francisco, is captured and brought to Chief Grey Cloud. The Chief, curious that rather than run for safety, Avram risks capture in order to retrieve the *Torah* scroll he dropped, asks his captive, even subjecting him to trial by fire, “Would you give up your life for this *Torah*?” Without a moment’s hesitation, Avram answers, “Yes.” The film, a comedy, struck a chord with the generation of Jews currently teaching or paying synagogue-school

tuition. There are teachers who use this clip to spark discussion on the sanctity of *Torah*. Steven uses this clip in his lessons, to present the idea that “nothing is more precious than saving the *Torah*.” He poses the question, “Is there something that means so much to you that you would risk bodily injury or dying for?” This is a part of his effort to teach that the *Torah*, “Is not just a history. [It is] the way people connected to God, the God they understood, the God they were in awe of.” He organizes a class art activity called “*Mishkan Impossible*” in which his students create the various pieces of the Tabernacle (tent of assembly) described in the *Torah* as they work through the four *parshiyoat* (weekly portions) devoted to this narrative taking place in the days just after the Israelites fled Egypt.

Another mode for conveying the specialness of the *Torah* is the Jewish storytelling tradition. There are a variety of versions of the tale, where several travelers are on a boat, two or three are merchants with precious goods to sell in distant ports, and one has a *Torah*. At sea, the ship is attacked by pirates who make off with the gold, the silks, the jewelry, but leave the *Torah* as a worthless item. The ship arrives in port. The merchants are bankrupt. The scholar is appreciated for his wisdom and embraced by the community (Becker, 2005). This narrative speaks of both the value of the holy scroll itself and the person skilled at helping others connect to its message. The prayer chanted at the end of the *Torah* service, *Etz Hayyim Hee*, compares *Torah* to a tree in saying:

It is a tree of life for those who grasp it,
And all that uphold it are blessed.
Its ways are pleasantness,
and all its paths are peace. (Harlow, 1985, p. 427)

The image of the tree can be understood as the text that has a self-sustaining vitality that is grounded, drawing nutrients from a root system, and activated by the light of day. It

needs to be nurtured; its fruits are there to be picked and appreciated. The scholar in this story, like Avram in the film mentioned previously, comes with a precious treasure, one that brings blessing and peace. The people who energetically welcomed these scholars into their communities are models of behavior, demonstrating an appreciation for their devotion to this sacred text.

One other opportunity to instill this attachment to *Torah* is the tradition of parading the dressed, ornamented scroll around the synagogue sanctuary before and after reading the *parshat hashavuah* (weekly portion). As it is marched around the sanctuary, congregants show reverence for the sacred object by touching its covering with their *siddur*, *tallit* or their hands and kissing it. Ricoeur (1995) says, “The sacred is experienced as awesome, as powerful, as overwhelming” (p. 49). Children learn that *Torah* scrolls are handwritten, are expensive, that they are vigilantly cared for, and that we do not even touch the text. I have seen the sense of wonder in the eyes of young children getting the chance to see an open scroll up close, to point out a word with a *yad* (pointer), to note the crowned letters, to be amazed at someone reading the text without vowels, and to see them clamoring to be chosen to dress or undress the scroll. However children interpret these experiences, they have entered the “onward course” that will bring them to the classroom engagement with teacher and text. The potential for this interaction to become, in Ricoeur’s (1995) phrasing, “abstract and cerebral” is mitigated by continuous engagement with the text. “Only the incarnation of the ancient symbolism ceaselessly reinterpreted gives this word something to say, not only to our understanding and will but also to our imagination and our heart; in short, to the whole human being” (p. 67). Steven and my other conversants live out this experience, renewing a vigorous

exploration of words of *Torah*, in the spirit of what Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (1981) terms the “Living Torah.”

Buber (1923/1958) speaks of the “I-Thou” and the “I-It” relationship. Steven carries it a step further. The *Torah* is an object, an It, but one that transcends its objective status, crossing over to the realm of the I-Thou. The *Torah* is a stand in, in effect, for God and that intangible, sacred, holy, revered domain. In his seventh grade classroom, Steven is the beneficiary of almost a decade of upbringing that casts his topic of instruction, *Torah*, as a contact with the sacred word. Teaching *Torah* is to place in students’ hands a textbook they have internalized as being in a unique category of school material, something other than the math, science, or history texts that fill their secular school backpack. There are levels of symbolism to putting a copy of the *Torah* in each student’s hands. The term, “in your hands” indicates responsibility being passed from one person to another. It implies accepting responsibility on the part of the recipient. Steven, speaking about his responsibilities as a teacher says:

I teach them how others have chosen to live and why or how I have. How they could live, you know ... I mean, the bigger picture ... It’s not my place to tell them what’s right or wrong, but maybe to tell them ... this is for you.

The relationship between student and teacher is very special. Buber (1923/1958) writes, “Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou*” (p. 15). How is this relationship experienced? What is a teacher’s responsibility for or to the student? How is that love made manifest? In *Love of Jerusalem*, Israel’s much beloved poet, Amichai, writes:

And there is a day when I see only beautiful youths
And there is a day when I only see cripples and the blind ...

Here they dig into the earth
And here they dig into the sky ...
Here they hate and there they love.

But he who loves Jerusalem
By the tourist book or by the prayer book
Is like one who loves a woman
By a manual of sex positions. (1995, p. 361)

This is a teacher's love for the student. It is embracing the diverse moods, feelings, and climates of the relationship, appreciating the attractive and the less so, the student who grinds away at the details of the materials before him and the one who makes for thoughtful discussion, the one who brings recalcitrance and the one with energy and enthusiasm. A teacher's love is a singular passion for teaching, beyond someone else's terms, the strictures of theory, or the teacher's guide. In another work, Amichai (1996) writes,

Love is finished again, like a profitable citrus season
Or like an archaeological dig that turned up
From deep inside the earth
Turbulent things that want to be forgotten. (p. 140)

A school year is like an agricultural or archaeological season. It is a doomed love in the sense that one partner will be sent away. The teacher has one turn of the cycle, and the child will move on to the next grade. Sacred text is the landscape in which the teacher provokes the turbulent, deep introspection that some students would prefer to avoid.

Terry relates:

Well it seems that at this grade level [fifth], the children start to question anything Jewish and anything related to spirituality and anything related to God. So they are filled with questions and they are filled with doubt. And they question the necessity to even be there. And all of them, almost without exception, believe that they are there so they could have a *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah*.

It is a challenging environment, one forcing the multi-dimensional discourse. It is Terry, facilitating the face to face encounter with God and spirituality. Her lifeworld is characterized by the heat generated by that *logos*. Inherent in the tension is the balance

between belief, faith, doubt, and any of the assumptions of the “Almighty;” the process is advanced through questions, proclamations, challenges and assertions that may corroborate, verify, or validate the turbulent suppositions that informed the dialogue. Is this a doomed or an endless love? What is it like to have a partner who is constantly threatening to get out of the relationship? Terry’s experience with *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* as a student fixation is not uncommon. Lynn says of the influence, “Directly it has none, indirectly I use it as a stick.”

In many schools after *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, children end their relationship with the synagogue-school. This is a part of the teacher’s experience seeing students give up their connection to the school, their Jewish studies, their classmates, and their teacher. What do teachers make of this drop-out phenomenon? Steven takes action:

So I think I made him convinced, I convinced him that I was interested in his being there and that it’s not just ... one way, I really value his presence there ... I get the impression he’ll continue with Wednesdays. I’m hoping he’ll come on Sundays, too, I just, I don’t know.

This would represent seeing each child as an individual, a voice with a unique, valued contribution to make to the class. Buber would call this relationship “love.” It is undoubtedly the experience of taking responsibility for, at minimum, a child’s continuing study of *Torah*, and beyond that, all the associations that go along with being a student in a synagogue-school: relationships with teacher, classmates, and the growth that occurs with exploring sacred text in a learning community.

Buber (1923/1958) writes, “I become through my relationship to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*” (p. 11). Perhaps Steven’s relationship has an element of the existential dilemma, “Who am I?” It is through relationship—to students, to the sacred

text and to the place where learning takes place, the synagogue, that the teacher becomes
“I.” Heidegger (1927/1962) speaks to this:

The question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing
itself. The understanding of oneself which leads *along this way* we call
“*existentiell*.” (p. 33)

It is through the student-teacher relationship, based on the encounter with sacred text, that
this dilemma journeys toward resolution. The paradox is that the road toward resolution
has no end; the journey is its own never satisfying answer.

Steven sheds light on the frontiers of his textual knowledge and the limits of his
understanding of sacred text:

I don’t feel the need to answer all their questions but as long as I am getting them
to think ... to asking the questions ... that I’ve accomplished that much rather than
giving them an answer to everything. I mean, I don’t have the answer to why
does God slay people? I mean, I’m not Buber or someone else. But they’re asking
the question at least so they’re thinking about it, which to me is ... that’s a victory
of some sort.

In this experience Steven makes personal meaning of the encounter with a view toward
what was achieved. He is satisfied that his students are thinking about the text to the
extent that they are asking provocative questions. He experiences a face-to face encounter
with text, time and genius. Steven’s response is not to turn to a commentary written by
Buber, who represents the great minds of Jewish study, or the “someone else” to whom
he refers, for an authoritative answer. He understands that this is not necessary; the
student’s question is its own answer. It is the discovery that is made on the journey. To
the teacher of sacred text, it is not a necessity to know why God slays people. It is
sufficient to ask the question.

There is a frequently told Hasidic story of Rabbi Zusya who, on his death bed, surrounded by his students, responds to a question asked by one of his students, “Why do you weep?”

I am afraid of what God will ask me when I die. I know God will not ask me, “Why were you not like Abraham?”—for who am I next to the man who first recognized the Almighty? And I know God will not ask me, “Why were you not like Moses?”—after all, I am not a great prophet and leader. But when God looks upon me and says, “Zusya, my child—why were you not Zusya?” What shall I say then? (Wolpe, 1993, pp. 224-225)

Steven does not need to be Abraham, Moses, “Buber or someone else.” Self understanding comes through *Dasein*. It is being present to experience. He is not Buber, but he is confident that he is Steven.

Rachel relates the following experience:

This one boy ... we were talking about being able to stand up for yourself, you know ... and I was asking the kids to write about what they learned, and he wrote how he learned something without even realizing he learned it. He was reading “Flowers for Algernon” and everyone was picking on Charlie ... and he said it was reading this that suddenly occurred to him what he’d been learning in Hebrew School, that someone has to stand up! You know, ‘I am crying.’ I am reading it because that’s what you want here, you know, that’s an impact.

Buber (1923/1958) continues, “All real living is meeting” (p. 11). We continually encounter this existential element of coming together, embracing, repelling, accepting and rejecting. Holtz says, “We live in communities that help us understand texts, what we want to accomplish when we want to teach them, where we see ourselves, and where we see our students and their futures” (2003, p. 83). Absent the I-Thou relation, meeting, face to face encounter, and community, the text loses its vitality; the underpinnings of Jewish life begin to unravel. Rachel facilitates her student bringing a secular, public school text face to face with a *mitzvah bein adam l’havero* (between people). The satisfaction is in seeing an ancient ethical principle applied to an understanding of a

contemporary narrative. Rachel sees her student relating a Jewish understanding to a secular text. This is the community working to help us understand texts; it has the power of self-revelation, and is a window to the future. The lived experience of teaching sacred text is to be within the proverbial meeting of the minds.

Carry On

Joyce goes out of her way to make her seventh grade classroom a stress-free, accepting environment. Punctuality is not made an issue, nor is leaving early. A student bringing a friend, even a non-Jewish one, is praised:

And I invite them to bring their schoolmates if they want and we've had three or four guests already this year ... If you have someone who's coming home from school with you or slept over or whatever, I give everyone at the beginning of the year permission to bring a guest with them without having to let me know.

A result of this is that impediments to participation are removed and students are encouraged to continue their relationship with the school beyond *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. "The highest compliment you can get is the fact that the kids are here, you know, and they're here and they're ready to learn" (Joyce). What is it that is complimented? Is it an affirmation of a teacher's Being? Is it a statement that the work the teacher has devoted herself to is, in the eyes of a child and his or her family, a worthwhile pursuit?

Buber (1923/1958) writes, "Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou*; by means of every particular *Thou* the primary word addresses the eternal *Thou*" (p. 75). This "highest compliment" is borne of a quality inherent in every encounter with sacred text. Beyond the raw presence of the *Torah* is an eternal relationship. It is one that links Joyce to the teachers with whom she studied and honors through her work. It is a link to the more distant past, connecting those individuals to generations of leaders and students who sustained a relationship to these teachings

through thousands of years. The narrative playing out in the synagogue-school classroom is richly layered with meaning. Joyce understands that the students' presence and participation is to experience Buber's "eternal *Thou*," becoming participants in a story that they will carry into the future.

Reflecting on this term "carry," I suggest that it has special meaning within the context of Judaism and, as a turn of phrase, has come up several times in this chapter. One of the things that makes *Shabbat* a sacred day of rest is refraining from any of the 39 forbidden categories of work. The prohibition on carrying is prominent in the consciousness of traditionally observant Jews, but less so among Conservative Jews. Carrying is moving something from a private domain to a public space. Among the implications are having a *tallit* already in synagogue for Shabbat, pushing a baby carriage, or carrying an umbrella. In the *Torah*'s narrative sometimes the term is literal, "The Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the Lord's Covenant" (*Torah, Devarim* 10:8), and at other times figurative, as when Moses cries out to God, "I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me" (*Torah, Bamidbar* 11:14). In the terms in which I use the word, carrying is taking on a responsibility, adding weight, and continuing a tradition. Moses' burden carries all of these elements.

In *The Things They Carried*, O'Brien (1990) uses "carry" as a theme for the life of a soldier in Vietnam. He says, "The things they carried were largely determined by necessity" (p. 2). Moses, carrying the weight of the Israelite people, the Levites carrying the holy ark, and the teacher carrying a class along, are fueled by a sense of necessity, the continuation of an ongoing project, one now going on for over four millennia. O'Brien (1990) says, "For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity" (p.

19). There are challenges along the way, sometimes abrasive encounters, but “carrying” also implies a certain demeanor, a public face that masks an inner turmoil. It is the mark of a leader, a role these teachers assume.

The journey of the teacher of sacred text also has elements of what O’Brien describes: “Some carried themselves with a sort of wistful resignation, others with pride or stiff soldierly discipline or good humor or macho zeal” (p. 20). I see this in a teacher’s making peace with the students who fixate on their *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* celebration as the end point of their studies, or the likelihood that some children will marry out of the faith. It is evident in teaching prayers, knowing that a significant number of these children rarely go to the services that make the learning purposeful. There is a zeal to their teaching, knowing that they are guiding steps of a journey, providing a good start or a vital course correction. They are introducing a way of looking at the world that some students may not be ready for, but who might be carried along for one more semester and make the connection in a subsequent year. These teachers have an appreciation for their place in the sweep of Jewish history, as members of a community and as adults passing on their understanding of what it means to live a life informed by the teachings of a sacred text.

As O’Brien says of his Vietnam soldiers, “They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die” (1990, p. 21), my conversants carry emotional weight too. They acknowledge those long gone who played a role in making them the persons they are. They also consider the possibility that their students might one day reflect on an insight they gained from them. To continue Moses’ earlier plea, “If you would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!” (*Torah*,

Bamidbar 11:15). This comes well after successfully liberating the Jewish people from slavery, receiving the Ten Commandments at Sinai, and the construction of the Tabernacle. Moses has and will continue to show the strength of character and leadership. Similarly, my teachers bring forward some of their emotional baggage, their personal stories and past classroom experiences, that are taken with discipline, humor and zeal. These teachers play a high profile role in their synagogue communities. They see their students for many years after they have moved on to higher grades and beyond. In many cases they teach more than one child from a family. There is a dignity that is evident in their classroom life as well as outside of it. As O'Brien describes it, "They carried their reputations" (p. 21), and perhaps their reputations will be carried on the backs of their students.

To Everything There is a Season

The face to face encounter spans the space between teacher, student, text, and time. One aspect is the time teacher and student devote to text study. It is within these bounds that Joyce finds her "highest compliment." From another vantage point is the millennial time that is represented in a document whose meaning has been explored through ages past and, via the weekly encounter in the classroom, which gives evidence that this way of being will be sustained through one more generational transition. Janet says, "So I, for me, I really feel like I'm part of this ... great chain of Jewish being." This image is frequently referenced. In a policy statement on the Jewish Future, the American Jewish Committee (1997) declares, "Jews, whether by birth or by choice, must consider themselves links in a great chain of Jewish tradition, a *shalsholet* (chain) that stretches

across the generations binding Jews across time and into the future” (p. 1). Steven brings forward this awareness in talking about observance of *kashrut* (dietary laws):

God gave us laws from Mount Sinai about not to eat shellfish. So many, many hundreds of generations have followed these rules and if nothing else it’s just because we are part of that line, they’re there for us to follow.

This is one aspect of how synagogue-school teachers present themselves in a non-judgmental way as examples of how a person can live their life, “That people can choose whatever they want to choose.” Katzew and Rapport (2005) phrase the concern as eloquently as many others do and come closer to Janet’s concern: “Just as a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, the chain of Jewish tradition is only as durable as the weakest generation of Jews” (p. 24).

This fragile pedigree goes back to the earliest Biblical narratives, when the next generation would be the progeny of Abraham and Sarah, or, slightly later in the *Torah*, with the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca. In that later text, a narrative tension is, who will carry the tradition begun with Abraham and Sarah into the future. Esau has the right of the first born, but shows no interest in the family’s spiritual property. He is the earthy, self-indulgent roughneck. Jacob, as rabbinic interpretation holds, is the more scholarly, reflective homebody, his mother’s favored child. A reading of these verses allows the interpretation that Jacob and Rebecca have the presence of mind to see what will happen if desert tradition holds and Esau emerges with the birthright and father’s final, climactic blessing. They conspire to tip that balance, and by clever audacity transfer those rights and privileges to Jacob, thereby preserving the continuity of tradition.

Janet comes face to face with her role as a modern Rebecca. She is passionate about teaching this story and recognizes its contemporary relevance. She takes this ancient echo and gives it presence:

Obviously, he (Esau) was dealt with wrongly and tricked, and deceived, but did Esau care about the covenant? Did Esau care about being a Jew? Did Esau care about God? Did Esau even think about God? No! Esau thought about his hunger. Esau thought about his comfort. When he was hungry, he stormed into the tent. He saw that food and he wanted it. It did not matter what he was giving up. I wanted the kids to understand that things you treasure and value, you safeguard and his birthright was not something that Esau was safeguarding; it was something he could care less about. If he had cared about this, he might have said to Jacob, "As hungry as I am, my birthright is mine." And he would have gone back to his tent and made his own food and he would have to wait a little while, but he would have still had his birthright. And I said to all of the kids, you know, if you are really, really, really, really hungry and somebody wants to trade their granola bar or their sandwich or whatever for your treasure, think about it that way and you know all of them were like, "No, I will wait until I get home, even though I will be really hungry." (Janet)

This scenario parallels Lily's student and the bacon cheeseburger referred to earlier. That culinary choice reflects thinking only about comfort, immediate gratification. It is seeing it and wanting it and a readiness to trade off your heritage, a demonstration where one more link in the chain of Jewish tradition has been broken. Janet is one of a generation of teachers reconnecting those chains.

A further reflection of the Being Janet brings to the classroom, is one who breaks the boundaries of traditional interpretation of text. She also conveys to her students the "What if?" mystery that, goes unanswered: "[Esau] might have come around. We don't know, you know, but it is something to think about and what would have happened with ... Jewish history, would there have been Abraham, Isaac, and Esau."

All of this adds to the sense of living history, being part of an epoch that may very well be referred back to in the distant future. Will this generation live up to the challenge of Jewish continuity as have the previous generations? O'Donohue (1999) writes:

As Heraclitus said, "You cannot step twice into the same river." In a matter of seconds, both you and the river are different. The river is the ideal of continuity. It preserves the fluency of continual change and yet holds one form. (p. 121)

Janet's students, as well as those of all my conversants, are that river. These teachers wade into the stream, take the opportunity to nurture an understanding of the meaning of a text, and then that moment flows onward. In the time it takes to draw in a breath, the potential the instant held may be gone, as a question or comment shifts the energy, and the lesson moves to a different track. The student is perpetually a changed individual, moving along, shaped by experience. Time advances and another *parsha*, chapter, or holiday becomes the topic of the day. All are shaped by the contours of the riverbed of the lifeworld. Will these moments of relationship be contributions to Jewish continuity? Will they be moments of fruitful encounter? Seeing these children as they grow older is akin to the water's cycle: coursing to the sea, evaporating, then raining down to replenish the ongoing river; a molecule bonded to other molecules as "a man leave[s] his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife" (*Torah, Bereshit 2:24*).

Heidegger writes, "Within the horizon of time the projection of a meaning of Being in general can be accomplished" (1927/1962, p. 278). The teacher is abundantly aware of the horizon of time in which she exists. There are the horizons that mark the beginning and end of a lesson. The sun rises and sets at these horizons, and she can only work in those few hours of daylight, her moment in the sun. There is a more vast horizon line, one in which the teacher-student relationship is given more room in which to

develop, that of the beginning and end of the year. From the teacher's perspective there is an even more expansive horizon, the one that preceded her adult responsibilities, that of a child in a role reversed from her current identity to the opposite boundary, the point at which she no longer defines herself as synagogue-school teacher. There are many such reflections:

When I was growing up we just learned it and we sort of learned it rote. I wasn't really very good at that. So I stopped trying. I think somewhere... somewhere in my Hebrew education, and I went to a very good Hebrew school ... It was probably really ahead of the time. But it was still rote. Or, either you were a really good reader, or you learned it by rote. And since I had other things on my head at the time, I think I wasn't really focused on it. (Lynn)

The horizon of time is a dominant presence defining the Being of the synagogue school teacher. The eight conversants are all in this teaching horizon in a particular way. "The reason that I am teaching ... the reason that I am going back to teach again next year is because it happens with these kids ... I mean, I really like teaching these two classes. I will continue teaching these classes" (Lynn). She, and her fellow conversants are acting in the spirit of the Biblical book, *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) which teaches, "To everything there is a season ... a time to build up ... a time to lose ... a time to keep ... a time to keep silence and a time to speak" (3:1-8). This is their season; there is no time to lose. It is their time to speak and their time to be heard in a voice that will echo through future generations.

Moved to Transcend Boundaries

A way of being that is concerned about generativity Heidegger calls, "concern" (1927/1962, p. 83), meaning "to carry out something, to get it done, to 'straighten it out'" (p. 83). Lynn has waded into the stream. Her unique class exists to be straightened out, brought up to and into the mainstream. She is having her influence on the course of

children's spiritual lives and has a unique opportunity to help students develop the acquisition of skills she gained long ago, and which she prizes, and shares with cohort after cohort of children.

In *Being and Time*, the footnote to "concern" says that its relation to the German term, "*besorgen*," is "by no means an exact equivalent" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 83). This qualification, in and of itself, is an exercise well within the bounds of the lived experience of the teacher of Jewish sacred text. Like a woods that thrives as a diverse ecosystem, in conversation, Michelle, Rachel and Terry, in particular, overcome the limits of the American vernacular with a blend of English, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Heidegger's expansion on the term does relate closely to many English dictionary definitions. "Concern" derives from 15th century Latin meaning, "to sift, separate, distinguish, discern, perceive, see, look at, regard, [and] have respect to" (*OED Online*). In these terms, *besorgen*, is an active ontological structural concept describing the lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher.

Essences that come forward in conversation are the teachers' ongoing sifting of content material with a nod to the limits of time, constant acute perception of text and student, and a relentless distinction between a line of conversation worth pursuing or by-passing. Where Heidegger describes it both in negative and positive terms, so, too, does it appear in such phrasings as "to have nothing to do with" and "a matter or subject that affects or touches one, and that ought to engage one's active interest and attention," respectively (*OED Online*). My conversants speak of their experience with those who choose the path of "to have nothing to do with" the study of sacred text. Manifestations are in the students who end their formal Jewish education after celebrating *Bar/Bat*

Mitzvah, those who choose not to engage in the lesson, or who clearly do not participate in traditions or rituals that are a part of the content of instruction.

Concern, though, also speaks of “relation” (*OED Online*). My conversants enter into a profound relationship bringing together the Jewish past, present and future; children and their families; traditions and rituals; and sacred text. Their *Dasein* is one of active, interested, attentive engagement with this matter that has affected them profoundly. Concern appertains to “affairs” as in “public affairs” or affairs of state (*OED Online*). Their Being is an expression of being touched by a Kennedyesque call to be a part of the Jewish polity’s need for participants in its intergenerational educational project. This description gives meaning to Heidegger’s idea that “*Dasein* is essentially Being with Others” (1927/1962, p. 281).

It is in the dialectical relationship between teacher, content of instruction, and student, that *Dasein* comes into Being. Absent one of these elements, particularly, if the student is not willing to engage with the text, the “with Others” would not Be. To return to Heraclitus’ imagery, the classroom is like a stretch of river, the students the flowing waters. The teacher channels the students through a course of studies. Should the river dry up, the flow of students would cease, the river bed would come to merge with the sweep of the terrain, as the teacher would drift away to another preoccupation, the classroom becoming a soul-less expanse. Who else are the Others in the lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher? What is the narrative of those relationships?

Relational Boundaries: Parental Anxiety – Teacher Vision

Ripening is the specific Being of the fruit. It is also a kind of Being of the “not-yet” (of unripeness); and, as such a kind of being, it is formally analogous to *Dasein*, in that the latter, like the former, is in every case already its “not-yet” in a sense still to be defined. (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 288)

It is in a poetic sense that children are referred to as the “fruit of our loins.” The Hebrew for fertile, *p’ray* (Bereshit, 35:11) shares its root meaning with *p’ree*, “fruit.” Thus the variation in Biblical translations show some saying, “Be fruitful” and others, “Be fertile,” in the exhortation or promise to have many children. Heidegger draws on the fruit’s quality of “ripening” as a simile for the state of “not-yet,” a state of both Being and of an expected, anticipated becoming. Rachel reflects on an encounter with a parent:

(It)makes me think of one parent yelling at me, ‘Can you give my child any *Yiddishkeit*? And my retort back, for which I got in trouble, was, ‘Have you ever heard of lighting *Shabbat* candles?’ You know, for five hours a week I can’t give the kid anything except a very, very slim look at what it is to be Jewish.

This exchange is rich in meaning. How do we even interpret a parent’s rage? What is the “*Yiddishkeit*” this parent is calling for? What was the source of Rachel’s response? That this face to face encounter brought to the surface such tempestuous currents gives evidence that there is a great deal at stake in the lifeworld of the synagogue-school. The teacher is an agent of the ripening that takes place, and by definition, the idea of an ultimate goal or a finished product is elusive.

Anxiety is the “state-of-mind (in which) *Dasein* finds itself *face to face* with the ‘nothing’ of the possible impossibility of its existence” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 310). Rachel is enveloped in a storm of anxiety. This parent is threatened by a state of not-yet growing into a not-ever *Yiddishkeit*. *Yiddishkeit* is generally translated as Jewishness or Judaism (*OED Online*). This definition does not carry us very far since Jewishness and Judaism mean different things to different people. Joyce relates:

They’re not so conflicted about the holiday, they’re conflicted about the practice of the holiday in their own home. And the fact that in school we teach that they should maintain a kosher *l’Pesach* (Passover) home and that there shouldn’t be any bread products, and that for eight days they should abstain from eating certain

types of foods, and that hopefully they will have changed their dishes and pots and changed their kitchen over or at least put away all leavened products that are in their home for those eight days. And a lot of students are enchanted with the idea but they find that after the *Seder* their mother, especially, goes back to eating a bagel for breakfast and doesn't change over her kitchen.

At its least demanding, broadest definition "*Yiddishkeit*" could be called a Jewish "way of life." Applying Sartre's terms to this aspect of the phenomenon, "Being is, Being is in-itself. Being is what it is" (1943/1956, p. lxvi). This is to say that there is a consciousness of what Jewish Being is. This parent has an experience of Jewish Being, possibly in the past, perhaps in the world of cinema or literature, and equally, potentially in the imagination. The parent's awareness has meaning. The yelling and the anxiousness are expressions of an understanding of the implications of the current state of Being. Just as the balance between fertility and devastation lurk in the shadows of some landscapes, Sartre's (1943/1956) observation that, "Nothingness haunts being" (p. 16) says that there is a side to this lifeworld that has not yet been revealed.

Yiddishkeit could include everything from eating bagels, working out at the Jewish Community Center gym, and taking note of a famous person's Jewish pedigree. It could also be, "A ... strictly observant Jewish society based upon the exclusive *Yiddishkeit* of the Eastern European ghetto" (*OED Online*). Joyce sees a full range of what *Yiddishkeit* may represent. In her teacher-parent discourse, Rachel applies her definition of this *Yiddishkeit* as making Jewish rituals a part of the child's home life. She uses what is possibly the most resonant act conceivable, a destination in time. The Shabbat candle lighting ritual declares when conceptually everything associated with 39 general forms of "creating" comes to a halt, when the six days of work are left behind for a sacred, meditative island in time, *Shabbat HaKodesh*, the Holy Sabbath. She plays both

the part of Moses and of God and, to borrow the *Torah*'s terminology, she has, "put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life" (*Torah, Devarim* 30:19).

Rachel presents a stark choice, stands this parent at a crossroads and in effect says, "It is up to you. Choose." One route leads to a "nothing" of his child's Jewishness, the other a possibility of its existence. Rachel opts to raise the anxiety level, to provoke a face to face encounter with a possible impossibility. What sense of the achievable does Rachel convey? She takes the impossibility of her own existence, five hours a week, the potential to give "a very, very slim look at what it is to be Jewish" and puts the responsibility for shaping the definition of that parent's ripening fruit of the loins directly in his hands. The relationship of teacher to parent is weighty; the face to face encounters are rich in possibility. What resonance did it have that the encounter comes back to her through a supervisor's comment?

The Biblical prophets are an embattled collective. Typically, their message of impending doom, unless a population changes its ways, is rejected and greeted with varying degrees of hostility. Synagogue-school teachers are not entirely dissimilar. They, too, bring the word of God, and point out the path of the righteous. As is the case with many of the prophets, an individual, a population, or a nation hears the word and embraces the message. Rachel says, "I get into trouble a lot," but then back tracks to say that despite conferences involving the rabbi, school administration, parents and children, "I am a good enough teacher and I have known [my principal] for a very long time ... And I never actually get in trouble." Her points may still resound for that parent, the truth to power where the parent has the power to bring *Yiddishkeit* into his child's life.

Janet has experiences that come from the same pool of parent anxiety. In this reflection she is complimented for enhancing a child's "Jewish identity," a more contemporary turn of phrase for the "*Yiddishkeit*," referred to earlier.

My hope is, from all of this, that these kids are going to become more compassionate human beings ... (We) talk about how making a difference in the world can just begin with them ... I feel wonderful because ... I think I'm making an impact and, I feel great when a parent will come over to me and say to me, 'My son just had a terrific year and he learned so much.' I had a grandmother come over and tell me (after) the Friday night (*Shabbat*) service, 'This is the first year I really think Max is enjoying religious school and he is always telling me things! He has learned so much!' And I just said, 'Thank you...' I said, 'Thank you so much!' I was so flattered because I want him to enjoy it, but I want him to learn, and I think they have... Here is someone from the generation before Max's parents and clearly this is important to her or she wouldn't be here on Friday.

This level of relationship building serves as an affirmation that the discourse taking place in the classroom is being continued in the home. The *Yiddishkeit* quota is being met to everyone's satisfaction. Activating the relationship is the same concern, *Yiddishkeit*. Here it is in the form of "more compassionate human beings." The parent of Rachel's student depended on her to inspire a Jewish consciousness that would flourish outside of the controlled environment of the classroom. Janet's student leaves the school and is further supported by a family that creates the opportunity to reflect on his studies and provides a home where Jewish Being exists. The ripening that is taking place, fed by the nutrient of Bible stories, is the sunshine of Janet's classroom. The potential for *anxiety* on Janet's part is also forestalled. The choice of making Jewish living an active part of a student's life beyond the classroom is recognized as positive. Parents are potential partners in this project. The role they take ranges from a haunting anxiety producing nothingness to conscious shapers of Jewish Being.

Max and the *Yiddishkeitless* student are among those children who give meaning to the experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting. They are the *alter*, the “Other” that Levinas (1995/1999) explores. He writes:

But already, in the very heart of the relationship with the other that characterizes our social life, alterity appears as a nonreciprocal relationship—that is, as contrasting strongly with contemporaneousness. The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. (p. 83)

This speaks of an intensity of relationship; it goes to the heart. There are elements of give and take, but not as equals. Levinas’ “contemporaneousness” speaks of a third element, an imposed presence added to the face to face of encounter. Is this the teacher’s understanding of the students? The reciprocity of the relationship is a constantly shifting balance. At turns the teacher brings prior study, experience, and an agenda to the class, a posture that the student is either reacting to or playing off. The student is reciprocating in participating in the unfolding of the lesson or in playing another role, with probing questions or startling insights that buffet the evolving exchange. It is the teacher’s image of the lesson that influences this relationship. It may be one lined with right answers to be gathered as flowers along a trail. It may be the unanticipated insights fostered by open inquiry. My conversants embrace the diversity of the Other, the *alter* who fits an idealized image of the perfect student, sometimes the what I am, sometimes the what I am not. Even a nonreciprocal relationship is reciprocal. My Being and my non-Being, my give and take, or the absence of engagement is a reciprocity. Some of those Other students who come to characterize the social engagement of the synagogue-school classroom are brought forward in the following section.

Stars and Sands

There are stars whose radiance is visible on earth though they have long been extinct. There are people whose brilliance continues to light the world though they are no longer among the living. These lights are particularly bright when the night is dark. They light the way for mankind. (Senesh, 2004, p. 1)

There is an ecology to the classroom environment, a semblance of the food chain where, should one link be removed, the whole ecosystem will begin to collapse. My conversants speak of students who keep the classroom in balance. In the Senesh poem above, the students' contributions in the present can be seen, as well as hope for the future, as stars lighting the world beyond today.

Senesh has come to epitomize her poetry. A Budapest born, Jewish woman, an immigrant to Palestine, a volunteer in the British army, and a brutally tortured and executed Nazi prisoner, her poetry has taken on a level of sanctity, in part because of her biography, but mostly for the wisdom of the text. For the majority of synagogue affiliated American Jews, her writings are encountered in the prayer book they use at *Shabbat* services. That we read these words more than six decades after her murder casts her as one of the extinguished lights that continues to "light the world." In the immediate, it is the "brilliance" of particular students that serves to "light the way" in the synagogue-school classroom.

The Blessing of Many Students

כִּי־בָרַךְ אֲבִרְכֶךָ וְהִרְבָּה אֲרֻבָּה אֶת־זַרְעֶךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְכַחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל־שֹׁפֶת הַיָּם (בראשית כב:יז)

I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore. (*Torah, Bereshit 22:17*)

A Biblical promise, in the case above to Abraham, is that your family line will live on through history. The promise is phrased in poetic, metaphorical terms. Consider

how many generations it would take to have descendents on this scale. The parent anxiety expressed in the previous section by Rachel's anxious *Yiddishkeit* parent is the fear of being the last Jewish generation in a family line, the last light of an extinct star. Maybe it is not the alarm at being last to carry the name to the next generation, but one of respect for the tradition that brought that family to be part of a Conservative synagogue and its religious school. For a teacher, those descendents are students. Giving away a sense of priority, the first verse in *Pirke Avot* teaches, "Raise many students." To a teacher, those students are their descendents, their blessing. While reflecting on a particularly inhospitable classroom space, a room lacking in square footage, Joyce comments, "As a matter of fact, the kids that I had in that classroom are now graduating from college. And I still see them around the *shul* and they still speak to me and so that's a good measure ... the fact that they're still here and that they'll speak to me." There is a widespread concern that students will stop being a part of the synagogue community after celebrating *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. For many families the focus of their child's Jewish education is that pivotal event. A grey area is entered into just following that milestone.

Joyce's experience is one of having many children continuing to be part of her class and to be a presence at services. Who are some of these numerous "stars" and "sands"? How are they that *alterity*, as Levinas (1995/1999) describes it, both the alter ego and not the alter ego of the teacher? As this section reveals, students bring their presence to the classroom in memorable and remarkable ways. They bring the unexpected of talent, insight, creativity, and commitment to the synagogue-school process. The experience of their Being is an essential part of the lifeworld of the teacher of sacred text. O'Donohue (1999) says, "We can never predict or plan whether we will

move towards or away from an other's presence" (p. 59). This thought introduces the terrain of the classroom, varying from an unwelcome, uphill climb to a rewarding, breathtaking vista.

Lost and Found In Translation

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ, וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ.

Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. (Harlow, 1985, p. 101)

Much of the interaction with sacred text is through translation. Sometimes the Hebrew offers a more approachable term, but the translation is stilted, or reflects a particular bias in the interpretation. Janet has been teaching a prayer that is traditionally said at least twice a day, the *V'Ahavta*. It begins with a commandment, "You shall love *Adonai*, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might" (Cahan, 1998, p. 30). Sometimes in trying to put a phrase in terms comprehensible to a third grader, a teacher needs to tap into the intelligence of those students, a teacher's explanation evolving into the question, "What do you think this verse means?" The author of the book translated a part of that phrase as,

"All your stuff" which I don't like as much ... I have always said to the kids, "All your might. What is 'might'?" And I think Evan, early on, when I had asked the kids, "How would you define 'might'?" I was really asking them, because I was looking for, how would I define "might," but I would rather it come from them, because ... he just said "With everything you've got," and to me that was a great And the kids understand that [as] ... like when you are playing soccer and you play as hard as you can play and you give it your all. (Janet)

As this recollection is taking place, the once third grader is now a sixth grader. His contribution to the discussion is a touchstone for the teacher. Evan has become the embodiment of Judaism's ancient understanding that teachers stand to learn the most

from students' insights. How does the student define the experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting? What challenges to the sense of self come to the fore?

Evan, coming up with the term, "with all you've got," removes an obstruction, clears a passage that Janet and the rest of the class can continue on through. Speaking to this challenge of vocabulary and translation, Ricoeur says, "The first assumption is that, for a philosophical inquiry, a religious faith may be identified through its language, or, to speak more accurately, as a kind of discourse ... the most appropriate place to interpret it [religious experience] on its own terms is to inquire into its linguistic expression" (1995, p. 35). One of the dynamics that takes place in the synagogue school classroom is "philosophical inquiry." These teachers are energized by the depths of understanding explored through their teaching of Judaism's sacred writings. As a text, the *V'Ahavta* works in multiple dimensions. It is a daily prayer, has an engaging, almost universally accepted *nusach* (chanting rhythm), and is a verse from the *Torah*. The public face of mastering *tefillah* only requires reading or memorization skill and an affinity for the *nusach*. Is mastering the chant sufficient for bringing entrée into spirited participation in services? For some teachers there is a level of satisfaction in making progress in that area. Terry writes:

The children joined me in reading the first five lines of Hebrew text. I then chanted the first line of the prayer, and asked the class to join in. The first time they attempted to sing along was rather bleak. The second time was better ... This past Tuesday ... they tried chanting the first five lines. To my surprise, they'd improved enough to follow along and join in ... I did *kvell* a little, maybe even a lot ... They're half-way there, and I'm the reason. This is why I teach.

It is still a challenge to master the Hebrew reading and an accomplishment for which a teacher can *kvell* (take pride, brag). Terry is aware of this as a skill that will enable her students to participate in prayer services in the congregation.

Terry's explanation to students, "You are learning this so when you are praying, it isn't just like saying bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla," tells us that teachers like her choose to pursue a more challenging agenda. Holtz quotes Duckworth, "Good teaching is about providing students with opportunities for 'the having of wonderful ideas'" (cited in Holtz 2003, p. 111). Terry, Janet and their colleagues live this injunction. It validates their work and provides the foundation and structures on which they continue to build their life's work. They create the space in which children can move from memorizing data points, reading a meaningless vocabulary list, or chanting in an un-accessed foreign language to grappling with core ideas and expanding on them.

The level of meaning these words have to teachers gives power to their mission of conveying at least a fraction of that appreciation to their students, to provoke discourse on these words of holiness. It is the particular linguistic expression of this text, identified from among the almost 6,000 *Torah* verses, that gives an additional degree of authority. The process of this discourse is one of looking closely at Biblical language, standing with one foot in the vernacular of the ancient world and the other in a contemporary landscape, communicating in a language that often falls short of expressing these "words of God."

Steven writes of teaching the prayer *Ein Keiloheinu*:

By taking the prayer apart, I could see that (some of) the kids gained a new appreciation for the words they've heard for years but never quite understood a deeper meaning of. Some of them were able to connect with one or more "points on the grid", i.e. either thanking G-d, acknowledging His greatness or by speaking to Him. They saw twenty ways of being amazed by and grateful to G-d for the ways which we know Him.

Here the words of God are conceptions of the deity. In this reflection on the classroom experience, it is the teacher's conceptualization of how to present the investigation of this prayer that allows the language to convey a sense of mystery and awe. His energy comes

from the students' engagement in the lesson and their response to the material. This theme of children being led from chanting prayer without even a superficial understanding of the words, albeit with energy and enthusiasm, to an appreciation for the liturgy is a recurring pattern from my conversants.

Michelle tells me about teaching the prayers chanted before and after reading the *Torah* and *Aleinu*, a prayer that has been a part of the daily liturgy since Medieval times and is considered by some to date back to pre-Christian antiquity. *Aleinu* contains the verse, "(God) made our lot unlike that of other people, assigning to us a unique destiny" (Harlow, 1985, p. 511). The *Torah* blessing expresses a similar theme, praising God who has, "chosen us from among the peoples by giving us His *Torah*" (Harlow, 1985, p. 401). As in Steven's reflection, these verses are familiar prayers to the students and they are fairly competent at chanting them before the exploration of their meaning. When Michelle's students begin to unpack the meaning of these verses they have been gleefully chanting for several years, they come face to face with the theme of the Jews as God's "Chosen People." Of that discussion Michelle says,

Oh! Some of the answers were golden, golden! I mean, the obvious answer ... was, "Well, we are not any better than anybody else. My Christian friends are perfectly good people."

Michelle's response raises a provocative question of personal identity. It pushes the children to consider their place in their social milieu, a comparison of themselves to their "Christian friends." This discussion is a regular feature of exploring these verses. The question is a defining theme of the synagogue-school and the experience of these teachers. What does "chosen" or a "unique destiny" mean? Engaging in this dialogue is like risking a dangerous crossing. An indelicate response could be an affront to student

sensibilities in this “upscale progressive community” as Michelle describes it, sweeping away any potential for meaningful conversation. Carefully phrased, these prayers can serve as the inspiration to join in on a several millennia old dialogue.

Michelle keeps the conversation an ongoing one:

Does it mean that we’ve been chosen to do a particular [task], not because we are necessarily better, but God chose us because he had a job to be done and he wanted us to do it ... needed someone to do it and he asked us to do it or did he choose us because we are actually better and if we were actually better, or, if we are supposed to actually be better, what does that mean?

This classroom dialogue transcends a multitude of boundaries, beyond multiple horizons. It is a vernacular from a time where a monotheistic Jewish community looked out at surrounding tribes or nations and judged their traditions and rituals inferior. It poses the same daunting question of the ethnicity and faith of neighbors, classmates and teammates. These children know where they stand in comparison academically and, in some cases, artistically. This dialogue shifts the volatile questioning onto another plane in the hearts and souls of already challenge filled, turbulent blends of pre-adolescent identity formation. This is a confrontation with a language of expression born of humanity’s perpetual struggle for self-definition, the confrontation between I and Thou. Michelle works to provoke an ongoing dialogue. She says, “Hopefully, I would like to believe that the discussions yield enough different ways of interpreting the text” so that her students can generate multiple meanings and arrive at their own understandings of the text. It is in her experience that years after these dialogues, her students continue to chant these verses, as they have for centuries, with understanding, enthusiasm and skill.

Gadamer offers this insight:

By learning foreign languages [people] do not alter their relationship to the world, like an aquatic animal that becomes a land animal; rather, while preserving their

own relationship to the world, they extend and enrich it by the world of the foreign language. Whoever has language “has” the world. (1960/1999, p. 452)

The mandate under which the teacher of sacred text operates is precisely to influence the students’ “relationship to the world.” They offer the opportunity to develop a language for expressing that relationship, for naming experience and for judging it.

What is it that makes relating to ancient text on 21st century terms, in a cultural milieu, and with an English language that sometimes falls short in approaching the intention of the Biblical author? An operant term for Ricoeur is “linguistic expression.” What is the influence of the grammatical structures, the arcane phrasing, and the elusive aspect of the text on the teaching-learning experience? Regarding *tefillah*, there may be another dimension. Previously, Steven and Michelle relate the experience of delving into the meaning of prayers students were already chanting in services, albeit, with varying degrees of skill, but invariably without comprehension of the Hebrew. Rachel says:

And so sometimes I don’t think kids get a lot out of the meaning of it at all but I think they get really into the tune ... and you know they will get really into it ... Now that group of kids ... it was not about the meaning for them and I realized that ... that it was about the fun that it was learning these really complicated words, really complicated tune.

The “relation between the formal structure of language and the expressive act of speaking” has been described as “enigmatic” (Abram, 1996, p. 82). Perhaps the give and take of partnership lends vitality to the spiritual journey through a world seen through the lens of sacred text. The communal body of students embracing the words themselves, their unknown, incantational, mysterious qualities, carried by melody and rhythm is another facet of this teaching-learning experience. There is relationship to the text independent of discursive meaning, a separate track of mystical conversation with an unseen presence. That this process is one of interpretation, finding personal meaning, and

not one of revealing verifiable facts is fundamental to this phenomenon. Abram (1996) says that “Language is not a fixed or ideal form, but an evolving medium we collectively inhabit, a vast topological matrix in which the speaking bodies are generative sites, vortices where the matrix itself is continually being spun out of the silence of sensorial experience” (p. 84). Every Being in this environment has something to contribute. It is like deepening understanding of the known world while expanding those boundaries into new territories. The language of Jewish sacred texts is an alternative pathway into this matrix, revealing unconventional experiences, and provoking unique self-definition. It is in the cosmos of these classrooms that is seen “the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world” (Abram, 1996, p. 89).

Expect the Unexpected

Do not disdain any person; do not underrate the importance of any thing—for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing without its place in the sun. (Pirke Avot 4:3)

This verse speaks well to the synagogue-school teacher. It is an ethic that informs a teacher of how to relate to the individual student within the context of the class. There are the gifted students:

Well you have to hear him chant, I was absolutely blown away. I mean, he still had the stuttering ... but his voice is unbelievable, he's got a beautiful, beautiful voice, I was like, “Oh my God.” (Steven)

I read into this pride, appreciation, and respect. It also calls to mind a comment from Lily, “I think that we continually underestimate children, so maybe they do have this deeper sense of it.” In Steven, that this thing of beauty was unexpected, beyond belief, is just such an underestimation. Conversely, high expectations, such as Janet’s earlier experience that led to Evan rising above the group to redefine a challenging term, or

Michelle's navigating her students through the concept of "chosenness," also lead to these "Oh my God" moments that define synagogue-school teaching. Steven describes what he experienced as beauty. O'Donohue (2004) writes that "Beauty brings a sense of completion and sureness" (p. 2). What is the nature of this beauty experienced by synagogue-school teachers?

It can start with completion. Complete is a synonym for whole. The root meaning of the Hebrew word for peace, *Shalom*, is "wholeness." These teacher moments are experiences of tranquility, where all seems on track. As "sureness," this is the beauty of glimpsing into the future, with these disciple-descendent-students taking on their destined leadership role in the Jewish community. Steven, Michelle, and my other conversants are drawn to a task that gives them the experience of beauty and inner peace.

O'Donohue (2004) offers us another avenue to understanding the beauty of teaching sacred text when he writes:

Each face is its own landscape and is quietly vibrant with the invisible textures of memory, story, dream, need, want and gift that make up the beauty of the individual life. (p. 15)

This speaks to the uniqueness of each student and the constellation of traits that they bring to the encounter with sacred text. It is the "deeper sense of it" that Lily refers to previously. As the teacher turns from face to face, there is a change of landscape and, like the hiker adjusting to changes in terrain, there is a demand to recalibrate such forces as intensity, tempo, and pressure to make space for beauty to be made manifest. My conversants experience the rewards this level of attunement offers. As a result, they are animated in a way that O'Donohue (2004) anticipates:

We feel most alive in the presence of the Beautiful for it meets the needs of our soul. (p. 2)

Teachers are brought to that “Oh my God” soul fulfilling level of appreciation by these unexpected bursts of extraordinary levels of skill or inspiration. It is akin to living the sacred text when witnessing the fulfillment of the teaching I refer to at the beginning of this section, “There is no person who does not have his (or her) hour.”

Michelle reflects on a similar experience with a student she describes as persistently disruptive and whose contribution to the class is more negative than positive. The label he has earned is “class clown.” A poetry exercise, however, brought out a different variety of participation. She connected to his inner struggle between continuing with his typical attitude and demonstrating a higher level ability that he was ready to express:

I was astonished and very gratified, I have to say, but astonished that he opted to take the task seriously, especially when some of his peers were, if not being, if not intending to be funny about it, were at least being frivolous about it I found myself conflicted. Do I just say that was very nice and go on to the next student or do I acknowledge that this was something, you know, unexpected and downright wonderful? I decided to opt for that ... At one point I said, ‘Michael, I am really impressed! You really did a wonderful job with this!’

There are the superstars of the class who consistently have something brilliant to contribute. Perhaps this circumstance is a product of sticking with a particular pedagogy. A possibility is that when teachers make space for students to use their own voice, poetry, music, these unexpected varieties of expression come to the fore. The lived experience of teaching sacred text is punctuated by these moments when the teacher facilitates and where students give creative expression of their understanding of text the Children of Israel have been grappling with for centuries. We have to wonder at the children who remain “class clown” or pass by unrecognized when teachers do not offer the opportunity to write, sing, or experience any of a multitude of pedagogies beyond Socratic dialogue.

These teachers, exploring alternative avenues of expression, are able to experience the “Oh my God” moment, to reveal a hidden mystery. Alexander (2001) says to “cultivate not only the capacity to express these feelings by means of literature, poetry, the arts, and religion, but also the ability to feel them—[is] to encounter the good directly in experience” (p. 74). Is this experience of giving new life to an ancient tradition, like an explorer’s witnessing of some remarkable natural phenomenon?

Rachel tells me about “the most amazing class we have ever had.” There is a six word opening to the *Amidah*, a series of praises, petitions, and words of thanks to God traditionally recited three times a day. It is her expectation to breeze past this opening verse and explore the material she anticipated to be more compelling. Instead, “We ended up discussing, for three classes, these six words that honestly I had not given that much thought to.” The unexpected here has come in the form of interest in a verse and the depth of meaning students were able to make of it. That she described this as “Beautiful” echoes other teachers’ experiences. She says:

It is how you like teaching and you come out on a Tuesday afternoon kind of at a high, because wow, these kids got something and they feel something ... This group realized that words can lose their meanings so easily.

An element that should have made this less unexpected was her understanding that these seventh grade students “can handle more logical thinking, and be a bit more introspective,” as she described them. These students have come to a transition in their growth and maturity. On the cusp of *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, that period that I have referred to earlier as a time that teachers are concerned that these children will continue their Jewish studies, Rachel witnesses the shift from a pre-adolescent capacity for experiencing sacred text and the potential for a teenager to make those words personally meaningful. In the

process, she experiences the beauty of cultivating the spiritually awakening encounter with sacred text. She recognizes this as a milestone in her students' spiritual journey.

Journeys imply transcendence, venturing from one space to another. It could be facilitated by the attention a guide brings to an aspect of the landscape, hardware that makes an area accessible, or a breakthrough that allows for thinking in new and different ways. In Rachel's hands, these three dimensions all come into play. She says, "My Education Director gives me a lot of latitude ... I am supposed to be Hebrew and *Tefillah*." That means she has the independence to choose to put any degree of focus on a particular verse, to craft the materials used for that exploration, and to leverage the emerging capabilities of her students. Lily also sees herself in this mode, "I'm kind of a conduit I guess, which is nice." Gadamer says:

A person who "understands" a text (or even a law) has not only projected himself understandingly toward a meaning—in the effort of understanding—but the accomplished understanding constitutes a state of new intellectual freedom. It implies the general possibility of interpreting, of seeing connections, of drawing conclusions, which constitutes being well versed in textual interpretation. (1960/1999, p. 260)

This idea of "new intellectual freedom" is the transcendence of boundaries to which synagogue-school teachers are party.

With Lily's third graders, "They totally were willing to think. It wasn't that you had to feed them information and then have them say it back to you, they were willing to figure out on their own." This experience is to a more dramatic degree for the teachers who work with the children who are closer to *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* age, students who are, "ready to ... start using critical thinking and interpreting prayer and interpreting *Torah*" (Rachel). That this dynamic defines the synagogue-school classroom is animated by

students and teachers “projecting” themselves, a process of risk taking, a readiness to transcend their present state of being.

Dickinson writes, “I dwell in possibility” (1960, p. 657). This is also where teachers live. They venture out before a room full of students, a landscape defined by the uneasy symmetry of potential success or failure. What possibility will be fulfilled? For Gadamer, “All such understanding is ultimately self-understanding” (1960/1999, p. 260). My conversants are most animated when talking about the unexpected, the unanticipated breakthroughs representing new, original connections. There is an organic relationship between teacher, text and student, like a healthy ecosystem. The understandings communicated by students are an affirmation to the teacher, Gadamer’s “self-understanding.” Dickinson had another ultimate possibility, “To gather Paradise” (1960, p. 657). Just as the peace of *Shabbat* is supposed to be a foretaste of the world to come, so, too, are these special classroom moments glimpses of unimaginable, heavenly, perfect beauty.

The unexpected is the expected. These standout students are reminders that at any time, any student, can play an extraordinary role in the unfolding narrative that is the classroom. In the *siddur*, as in the *Torah*, *V’Ahavta* is preceded by the *Shema*. When the *Torah* is written, the last letter of the first word of this verse, *ayin*, and the last letter of the last word *dalet* are written a bit larger than the other letters. These letters spell out the word *Ed* which means witness. An interpretation is that the Jewish people bear witness to God’s oneness. Within the context of the teachers who teach this verse, as well as those phrases that precede and follow it, they are witness to the continuity of the relationship of the Jewish people to this sacred text, a relationship they facilitate, in which they play the

part of a conduit. It is a powerful role, like influencing the course of history. Gadamer (1960/1999) writes, “All power exists only in its expression” (p. 205). These teachers have the potential to bring to expression significant influence. At one stage in my career, workshop leaders pointed out that Golda Meir, who would one day be Prime Minister of the State of Israel, as a child sat in a “Hebrew school” classroom much like ours. The message, you do not know what potential these students have, when they will “have their hour,” and what possibility there is that your “place in the sun” may be that shining moment when you brought about a new understanding of the world for that child.

Testing and Re-Defining Boundaries

אַל-תִּבִּיט אַחֲרֶיךָ (בראשית יט:יז)

Do not look behind you. (*Torah, Bereshit 19:17*)

The “look” is of significance in Jewish text from the earliest chapters of the *Torah*. When the cities of Sodom and Gomorra, were to be destroyed, Lot’s family, being given the chance to escape, is told not to look back. Lot’s wife violates this instruction and is turned into a pillar of salt. While the text offers no further explanation, an interpretation is that this is because they are to sever all connection with the wickedness of those cities and she proves herself unable to make that break with the past. Abraham is told by God to look north, south, east, and west and promised all the lands that he can see. Of the Biblical matriarchs, Sarah and Rebecca are described as pretty “to look upon.” In these examples, a look holds power. In the first of these cases, the person doing the looking brings on personal destruction by dwelling on the past and her inability to look forward to the days ahead of her. In the second case, the look mirrors the other promises made to Abraham of his almost limitless potential. Land is wealth and here he is given

land as far as the eyes can see. The role is reversed in our third use of the look as Sarah and Rebecca are the objects of attention. They are looked at. Here we connect with these two sides of the “look” as it relates to teachers of sacred text. Sartre writes, “The Other’s look makes me be beyond my being in this world and puts me in the midst of the world which is at once this world and beyond this world” (1943/1956, p. 237). The Biblical view, and Sartre’s, speak of the affect of being held in another’s eyes.

Terry says, “I let them ask questions, I let them delve and dig around because they are looking for something.” She is being-looked-to for answers. In part, this speaks to the spontaneity of the synagogue-school classroom, the freedom to probe the boundaries of a curricular framework to explore a personal interest. More significantly, it speaks of the power of the sacred texts being studied and the space in which this takes place to look to the teacher, to pose questions of the mysteries of life. Steven introduces another possibility:

Maybe they are looking for some more pragmatism, maybe looking for some signs or something, and if they can’t find that ... I don’t want them to go and say, “This is impossible!”

The realm of the metaphysical, a dimension that the five senses cannot perceive, introduces another look. Terry relates teaching *Gevurot*, a prayer that speaks of God’s powers. She has experienced a range of responses which “every couple of years” includes, “Look, you know, I just don’t believe that God is still here.” Is this a call to revolution, a cry for help, an attempt to lay out a boundary, or looking for attention? This is a student effectively inviting the teacher to look at me for what I am, an oppositional force. “It may not make a difference if the kids don’t agree with it. What I don’t want them to do is to reject the whole thing and say, ‘Well, this is a bunch of [nonsense]!’”

(Steven). His agenda is to keep his students engaged in the process, to keep looking at the text and looking for meaning in those words of holiness. He is looking forward.

Looking Down

Kids sometimes may look down on things. (Terry, group conversation)

Being “looked down on” is the experience of another look, an expression of assumed superiority. What is the experience of being looked at with an attitude contrary to “not disdain any person” (*Pirke Avot* 4:3)? Rachel relates this experience:

Hailey (a co-teacher) has every Coach bag ever made and I don’t, and every year, kids will comment on her wardrobe versus mine, and my car versus their parents’. I mean, that’s always there. I once had a student tell me that it doesn’t really matter what I say because I will never make as much money as her father.

This comment is coming from a student, one of the people teachers regard as representing the Jewish community’s hopes for the future, the *raison d’être* of their teaching. What is the source of this student’s attitude? What is the teacher’s response to such a sudden storm? In the wealthy, suburban county in which this study takes place, there is a cultural milieu that supports this student’s values, manners, and sense of propriety and enables such behavior.

In a course called “The School Curriculum,” Professor Selden, looking at the intrusion of Channel One into public schools and with it the exposure of students to commercial advertisements, summed up his lecture stating, “In the absence of values, market values will do” (Selden, February 1997). This can be understood for its multiple meanings. At one level the children have been sold out for their potential as consumers. Swimming in a sea of marketing for which they are the target, they have incorporated the message into their relationship with the world; success and ostentatious wealth are two sides of the same coin. On another plane, the consequence is that the ideal of the academy

as a marketplace of ideas has been compromised to the capital marketplace of expensive goods and services. While Channel One students are victims, caught between underfunded schools, the need for even the relatively low technology of cable television, and profit hungry business interests, these synagogue-school students are equally unshielded from the commercial interests that want to count their allowance in their accounts received. This is the value for pretentious wealth infringing on the sacred space of the synagogue-school classroom, an interference with discussing the text because the person presenting the chapter does not drive a car from northern Europe.

What is it like to be looked at, appraised, and the validity of your being as a teacher and a human being assessed against the metric of material wealth? Sartre (1943/1956) writes:

To be looked at is to apprehend oneself as the unknowable object of unknowable appraisals—in particular, of value judgments ... being-seen constitutes me as a defenseless being for a freedom which is not my freedom I am in danger. This danger is not an accident but the permanent structure of my being-for-others. (p. 243)

Rachel may well be looked upon by this materialistically driven child as a discomforting representative of Biblical world values. She is aware of her vulnerability and is open to becoming knowable. Until that state is reached, she is the unknown, being judged against a superficial standard that sees capital and the accumulation of status symbols as the verification of having something of value to say. This danger, however, is not an irresolvable force. Rough terrain can be confronted with skill and practice. Rachel continues to negotiate these occasional turbulent passages knowing that her being-for-others exposes her to such experiences. That this student casts her lot with a loyalty to

money and materialism is one of many possibilities. Recognizing the potential this exchange holds, what is her response?

I find that sometimes it makes me more resolute in the way I want to raise my daughter, I really do! And sometimes it gets me really angry at parents. Because, again, regardless of what I am teaching for five hours a week, it's what they are getting everywhere else in the universe that tells them that going to Montgomery Mall on a Saturday morning is more important. (Rachel)

Like Janus of Roman mythology, Rachel looks in two directions. In being resolute, she looks inward for strength, gaining confidence from the life decisions she has made. Looking outward, she looks at parents and how they are raising the children she teaches. Her response is a renewed dedication: to her daughter, to the rest of that class, and indeed, even that challenging student. She is like the mountain climber who emerges from a snow cave after a freak storm to descend the slope with a survival tale to be told. She has seen the enemy and it is not the "us" she represents. She sees some parents as part of the problem and children's adoption of a values system in conflict with the message of the material she is teaching as another face of that predicament.

Ricoeur lays the groundwork for recognizing the potentially treacherous terrain on which the teacher of sacred text treads and the inevitability of this predicament. The world of the *Torah* is long before that of Galileo, Copernicus, the discovery of the DNA molecule, satellites beaming back images from deep space, shopping malls, Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue. Ricoeur says:

The Biblical world has aspects that are cosmic (it is a creation), that are communitarian (it speaks of a people), that are historical and cultural (it speaks of Israel and the kingdom of God), and that are personal. Humankind is reached through a multiplicity of dimensions that are as much cosmological and historical and worldly as they are anthropological, ethical, and personal. (1995, pp. 44-45)

It can be understood that teaching Jewish sacred text demands suspending, or transforming, a student's understanding of socially constructed barriers. What are these obstacles? To a great extent they are the values, beliefs, attitudes and pre-adolescent understandings of 21st century America. Rachel is encouraged that her students are engaged in a personal, internal struggle and even that she represents that "because it's there" mountain that they are summoning the courage to climb. Despite the slap, the direct confrontation with a completely objectionable set of ethics, Rachel maintains her poise, her presence in these children's lives. She knows that in most respects she is looked up to:

Kids like to ask a lot about my own personal upbringing and beliefs, and you know, what all I make my daughter do and things like that. I feel like they have no context sometimes for what I am talking about. And the fact that ... what we are teaching, just because it is thousands of years old, doesn't mean that it is out of date or that it is, you know, not relevant. "Do unto others, as you have others do unto you" is still what they want. They just don't practice it, but it's what they want. They don't want someone to do wrong to them, but it doesn't occur to them that one of the best ways to help that is to then not to do wrong to someone else, you know, that next step doesn't happen, but it's not outdated.

This is a recurring theme. Michelle says:

I really see us as being in the most positive sense, "Missionaries." We have been charged with a mission to not only teach Jewish, but hopefully, to inspire Jewish, so that regardless of what they actually do ... what they actually do in their future lives or in their present lives for that matter, that they see Judaism as a positive ideal.

There is a strong sense of purpose and commitment behind the dedication to their responsibilities that the sporadic hostile look will not shatter. Despite the occasional, harsh encounter with adversity, these teachers demonstrate a potent sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.

Window Shopping in the Marketplace of Ideas

Given the conflict in the preceding section, there is an irony to be acknowledged in the historic roots of the days that the *Torah* is read as a part of the synagogue service. Besides the reading on *Shabbat*, there is a *Torah* service on Monday and Thursday mornings. Coincidence or the recognition of an opportunity these latter two days, in the ancient world, are market days when people trek from the fields to the village with goods and services to exchange. It is possible to imagine the people's attention being competed for between the public reading of the *Torah*, a scholar's *drash* (teaching), and the call to stalls offering the farmer's bounty—a bazaar mix of nourishment for the body and the spirit. The synagogue-school teacher is, in effect, cast into a similar role. Stepping into the open market, Being “out there,” exposed to the torrent of activity is part of the dangerous “permanent structure” (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 243) of synagogue-school teaching. It is a provocative, risk taking behavior, an “experience [of] the distanceless presence of the Other” (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 246) to enter into what will be a close, personal, inevitable confrontation of generations, cultures, values and ideas. At times it leads to an encounter with the limits of a teacher's learning,

Absolutely, and every time I find that I am at a loggerheads, I cannot answer any more clearly. Their particular questions, I find myself having to go back home and look up more and try to get a better answer for them. And if I cannot get a better answer for them I will ask the rabbi for a better answer. (Terry)

This is where the barrier between a knowledgeable, but not all-knowing, teacher and the student as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge is shattered by the openness to questions. The queries thrown up by a child today may not be the same ones that were proffered one, five, ten or twenty years ago.

Enlightenment thinking holds to the principle that knowledge, understanding, and education are society's obligation to the people. The relationship is mutually beneficial, recognizing that an educated populace is necessary for the appreciation, perpetuation and survival of a way of life, be it founded on a religious worldview or a political philosophy. For the synagogue-school teacher this all hearkens to an earlier tradition, one chanted in the *V'Ahavta*, that daily prayer pulled from a more ancient text, the *Torah*, "Teach these words to your children." Rachel understands that her Being is as much a lesson as any page she pores over with her pupils. The students are interested in her as a model of behavior, a lifestyle they want to connect to, and to live vicariously. Joyce tells me about her experience teaching rules of Passover observance, such as abstaining from eating bread for eight days, clearing out all leaven from the house. "And they have conflicts because they would like to do it because they feel that that's the proper thing to do yet they don't want to insult their parents and they don't quite know how to deal with it But I try to emphasize to them that it's a personal choice and that when they are adults they might choose to do it differently, but while they're living at home this is the way it is."

Ricoeur recognizes the challenge of making meaningful an ancient tradition in a suburban 21st century society.

First, one fact of our culture is that we live in a desacralized world Modern persons no longer have a sacred space, a center, a *templum*, a holy mountain, or an *axis mundi* We only speak of the sacred world today as something archaic. The sacred is the archaic. (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 61)

More than competitors in the marketplace of ideas, these teachers act as guides through a threatening, inhospitable terrain. There is the pull of contemporary society's valuing or devaluing of people based on their material wealth, their socio-economic status, and other

superficial measures. There is an American caste system, not too different from class differences that inspired Marx or Ghandi to call for the reordering of the societies in which they lived, and a similar attitude toward our own underclass or *dalit* (untouchables).

Janet's lessons are an antidote to devaluing any segment of society. She says:

When we do social action projects, it's what you're doing that's going to make the difference and you can't look so much at what that thing is that actually is going to happen ... whether you're going to a shelter to cook dinner. The people are still going to be homeless, but you've brought something to their evening...that has made the difference ... If you do good, you know, good things will happen. And that's what, I tell the kids.

Nonetheless, among the students, the social order may play out like the earth's magnetic field with dense bands at the poles representing the in-crowd, the "cool kids," and the less tightly arrayed halo between poles, those less integrated into the social fabric. This condition runs counter to Jewish teachings which tend toward an inclusive egalitarian society. This is even more conscious a construct in a Conservative synagogue where gender neutrality is a more active subject.

In my Congregation it is still a statement for a woman to wear a *tallit* and a *kippa*, prayer adornments traditionally required of men. Almost all of the children these teachers work with know that ten adults are required to carry out certain rituals and to recite particular prayers. It is ten adults, not ten wealthy, healthy, beautiful or even male adults. For ritual purposes, all those over the age of 13, have equal standing in the Jewish community. These teachers act out the role of God, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse" (*Torah, Devarim* 30:19). The curses are the attractive, yet dysfunctional, values of contemporary American society. The blessings are those archaic values, "Do unto others," as Rachel cites.

Lynn describes the teacher's role as presenting the teachings and for her students to come to their own conclusions:

I think that is what we tried to do with our kids, you know, find the place where they can be reconciled and so that they don't have to accept one and deny the other, because we are talking about two different realms.

This teacher-student encounter occurs at a juncture where a vital assessment of, "Who am I?" is taking place. The child is trying to make sense of the world, grappling with the challenge of recognizing the speed bumps, potholes, safe passages and developing the moral compass to avoid the wrong turns or the ability to pick up the trail when lost.

In these clashes are the manifestations of what Holtz (2003) proposes, that "Jewish education faces a challenge imposed by contemporary American culture" (p. 26). He says the challenge is based on Jewish values that stand diametrically opposed to American culture, particularly:

1. God
2. Divinely ordained rules
3. A particularistic consciousness of the world
4. The classic Jewish consciousness [which] views *Torah* as the ultimate source of wisdom
5. Community rather than the individual. (pp. 26-27)

Holtz says that, "Teaching Jewish texts means swimming against a powerful and long-standing current" (p. 28). I present moments that illustrate thinking that stands in opposition to the message the synagogue-school teacher conveys. It must come from somewhere in the child's experience that,

They even questioned the presence of God, so it has been extremely challenging. [A student] stormed out ... and said it was unimportant and pointless ... He felt that he was wasting his life away learning these Jewish prayers and Jewish ceremonies and Jewish traditions. (Terry)

That Jewish life continues today is testimony to a contrary attitude toward going with the flow. Over the millennia this would have included assimilation into Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Christian or Muslim societies. In the *midrashic* tradition, Abraham, the first Hebrew, is the original iconoclast, literally a breaker of icons. What are the icons of American society? Can these five categories of Jewish expression be, “an antidote to some of the weaknesses in [American] culture” (p. 32) as Holtz (2003) proposes. Synagogue-school teachers bring a familiarity with both ends of that dyad, American and Jewish culture. They can draw attention to the contrast between what the much loved American writer Emerson writes and a Jewish ethic traditionally spoken every Friday evening, to describe the woman of the house, or women in general. Emerson writes:

[D]o not tell me, as a good man did to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. (Emerson, as cited in Holtz, p. 30)

Eshet Hayil, A Woman of Valor, takes a verse from the Psalms and says,

She extends a hand to the poor; she offers her hands to the needy. (Cahan, 1998, p. 310)

It is the synagogue-school teachers who are most assertively charging into the marketplace of ideas, making the case for the wisdom of Judaism’s sacred texts. Although in the process they sometimes take a beating, they also bring patience, persistence, and inner strength to their task. They have already resolved their “Who am I?” question. Their satisfaction comes in revealing, “Who are you?” Steven sees the *Torah* as being the path for that journey of self-discovery.

But I can really see the love of learning *Torah* and incorporating *Torah* and incorporating just the stories into your life even if you don't do what the *Torah* says necessarily, but it is part of who we are.

In The Presence of Genius

וַיְהִי בִּרְדֹּת מֹשֶׁה מִהָר סִינַי וְשָׁנִי לַחַת הָעֵדֻת בֵּינִי-מֹשֶׁה
בִּרְדֹּתוֹ מִן-הָהָר וּמֹשֶׁה לֹא-יָדַע כִּי קָרַן עוֹר פָּנָיו בִּדְבָרוֹ
(שמות לד:כט)

So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him. (*Torah, Shemot 34:29*)

When Moses comes down from Mt. Sinai, according to the Biblical text, of almost equal significance to the message he brings, the Ten Commandments, is his appearance. That “his face was radiant” can be read metaphorically as there was a particular glow, an aura, or a presence about him. Each of these terms would describe someone who projects a unique personal appeal, an individual to whom people connect, and in whose presence they dare to be. After this particular encounter with the Almighty, there is a charisma to Moses; he has been empowered, like few before him. If, as the movie producer Samuel Goldwyn says, “An oral agreement isn’t worth the paper it’s printed on,” the word of God, carved in stone, would be more like a binding contract with humanity. My conversants all have a combination of similar Moses-like qualities, a radiant presence and connection to the sacred word.

If the Jewish people can be referred to as *B’nei Avraham* or *B’nei Yisrael*, the Children of Abraham and Children of Israel, respectively, then teachers, to coin a phrase, are the *B’nei Moshe*, the Children of Moses, Moses the prototypical teacher. Like Moses, they have a message to bring to the people and a spiritual connection that goes beyond scientifically verifiable reality. They, too, bring to their work the same full range of

human qualities Moses expresses, from moments of self-doubt to complete confidence, decisiveness to indecision, and vision to myopia. Like Moses, they respond to the call to serve their people, “Who am I” (*Torah, Shemot* 3:11) that I would be chosen; an expression of humility, not of pompous ego. Similarly, the powers-that-be sometimes laud with praise and sometimes admonish their work. Sometimes they stick to the script, curriculum, or more likely, make their own interpretation, stray into the grey just off the fringes and beyond.

Gadamer (1960/1999) writes:

The irrationality of genius brings out one element in the creative production of rules evident in both creator and recipient, namely that there is no other way of grasping the content of a work of art than through the unique form of the work and in the mystery of its impression, which can never be fully expressed by any language ... it facilitates the play of one’s mental powers, increases the vitality that comes from the harmony between imagination and understanding, and invites one to linger before the beautiful. Genius is ultimately a manifestation of this vivifying spirit for, as opposed to the pedant’s rigid adherence to rules, genius exhibits a free sweep of invention and thus the originality that creates new models. (p. 53)

This is to say that the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting is the work of genius. It can appear to be irrational, indescribable, mysterious, harmonious, and gives one pause. It is a work of transiting the terrain between structured formula and inventive originality. Genius is etymologically related to the first word of the *Torah*. The Hebrew, *Bereshit*, is most frequently translated as “In the beginning.” This word sets in motion the creation story, an origin narrative, the ultimate example of uniqueness and originality. In America, the more familiarly referenced name for this Biblical book is its Greek name, *Genesis*. At its root this term refers to “being born, to come into being” (*OED Online*). The six days of creation, culminating in bringing into being “man and woman,” is more than intelligent design; it is a work of genius.

While in the 14th century genius is used to refer to an invisible, guiding spirit, “to govern [one’s] fortunes and determine ... character,” by the 17th century the word came to its meaning with which we more closely associate it today, “Natural ability or capacity; quality of mind; the special endowments which fit a [person] for [their] peculiar work” (*OED Online*). What are the “special endowments” of the synagogue-school teacher? In Lily’s case it is an approach to the teaching process that is open to unpredictable outcomes:

I think children are so smart and fascinating ... They are so insightful. They can see things so much more clearly than adults in many ways. And that’s what’s fun for me to talk to kids about, what they’re thinking and to encourage them to think, because I think often many adults don’t, don’t encourage kids to think, and they feed them lots of lots of information and just don’t encourage a deeper understanding.

This is a quality of mind that prizes what children bring to the classroom and the capacity to bring out the expression of genius to which they are capable. In a Jewish sense, it is saying that the commentaries that are written in the margins of the published text are an intermediate stage in the Jewish peoples’ spiritual journey, and the classroom is a space in which that trek continues. Lily is the proponent of an unpredictable pedagogy, fuelled by an awareness that her classroom is populated by those who will continue to enrich understanding of the sacred texts.

The idea of genius, over the course of the 18th century, evolves into “native intellectual power of an exalted type, such as is attributed to those who are esteemed greatest in any department of art, speculation, or practice; instinctive and extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery” (*OED Online*). Do these teachers regard themselves as exalted, esteemed or extraordinary? On what resources of “instinctive ... extraordinary capacity” do they draw? An aspect of

that, in Lily's case, is the openness to engage in a process that calls for surefootedness, constant adaptation to changing circumstances. Genius is further described as, "instinctive perception and spontaneous activity" (*OED Online*). How does this particular pairing play out in the lifeworld of the synagogue-school classroom? What are the spiritual sources of the synagogue-school teacher's Being? Is it "that much rarer species of intellectual power which is derived from the genial nature ... from the spirit of suffering and enjoying ... from the spirit of pleasure and pain" (*OED Online*) as it is also defined? In what ways is teaching sacred text the work of genius? I further explore the qualities of genius at work in the teaching of sacred text.

Spontaneity: Living In The Moment

וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיָּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ-מִדְיָן (שמות ב:טו)

Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian. (*Torah, Shemot 2:15*)

Striking out instinctively and spontaneously defines each of my conversants. Lily tells me, "I stopped writing lesson plans for principals, I don't know, a decade ago." This is close to the 14th century sense of genius, trusting in the unseen spirit to see her to success. In the Biblical narrative, it is a dramatic turn of events that casts Moses in the role of outlaw, taking an unplanned, likely haphazard, and probably adventurous, flight from Egypt. He makes an instinctive, spontaneous decision, flight. How many synagogue-school teaching careers have been launched as whimsically? Rachel says:

I kind of fell into teaching... I was working [as a secretary in the school office] ... I have a daughter and so I decided to quit so I could actually be home with my daughter. The day I quit, Sam came to me and said, "Fantastic ... I [have been] waiting for you to do this. Come teach for me."

It would be through *midrash*, the ancient story telling tradition of filling in the missing details of text, that would flesh out the details of Moses' journey referred to

above. What happened between those two sentences, fleeing from Pharoah and arriving in Midian? Does the *midrashic* tradition extend beyond the study of sacred text into being a way of relating to the world? Lily knows that despite her lack of filing lesson plans, she is facilitating a positive experience for her students. Her principal has the potential to influence change in her teaching practice. However, Lily says he

Walks in and sits and you know, I kind of forget about it, I feel like ... I'm fairly confident enough that I don't change, I worry, but I don't change what I'm doing. That's the terrible thing. I get nervous and I worry ... but then the lesson went on.

This level of independence is an expression of the esteem with which Lily is regarded. Her principal, at some level, recognizes in her originality and inventiveness, the work of genius. She lives the *midrash*, the details of the narrative, from the insightful comments of her students to the digressions into which her lessons sometimes stray. Her administrative supervisor drops in, sees the topic being covered, and then moves on, perhaps mentally writing his own *midrash*. It is in this in-between space in which the spirit of genius operates. What is the experience of planning to teach and then carrying out that plan given the freedom to express her instinctive, extraordinary capacities? What boundaries are negotiated along the way? How is this the work of genius?

The synagogue-school teacher's lesson is like Moses' fugitive journey. There are many possible events that can occur along the way. Moses chose a direction, but not a particular destination, and there are many possible routes he could have followed. Among hikers and backpackers there are those who carefully plan trips and follow trails scrupulously, paralleling Gadamer's "pedant's rigid adherence to rules." Others like the adventure of bushwhacking, breaking from the trail and blazing their own path, as Gadamer describes, "the vivifying spirit." The bushwhacker is given to improvisation and

spontaneity. A dictionary definition of spontaneous gives an etymology rooted in the Latin, “*sponte* of one's own accord, freely, willingly” (*OED Online*). The lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher is to be in a constant state of assessing the situation and making a decision, in effect, exercising “free will.”

Michelle talks of an unpredictable student:

So it would make me anxious, like, “Oh God! I better get him under control before everything runs amok!” So I worried, when I would call upon him, is he going to say something silly and is that going to set the class off, and yet, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't give him a chance to participate ... And I finally reached the point where I took him aside one day and said to him, “If I call on you and you give an outrageous answer, then that will be the last time I call on you for the day because it means I can't count on you responding appropriately to the question.”

She has the constant challenge of risking what will be the nature of his class participation and finding a way to bring him into the classroom process. It is an ongoing assessment-decision making process. It is also one of generating new approaches, in this case finally presenting him with the conditions for his participation in the lesson's open dialogue.

This illustrates a secondary definition of spontaneous, “Arising purely from, entirely determined by, the internal operative or directive forces of the organism” (*OED Online*).

A lesson is an exercise in constant course corrections. There may be an intention of getting from point A to point B, but there are a multitude of uncharted surprises. These teachers confidently trust their internal resources.

In many ways synagogue school teaching demands the risk taking, spontaneity of bushwhacking. It is to approach things with unique skill, bring experience to bear, and to chance the elements. In a sense it is like taking on the risks of a fugitive, like Moses in the above verse. Similarly, the synagogue-school teacher straying from the formal curriculum, for the purpose of more effectively teaching sacred text, breaks from the

safety of the well worn path and chances the sanctions of an outlaw. The equivalent of being apprehended, the principal stopping by is a worry for Lily:

I just know that people are walking by seeing these kids, you know, wearing funny clothes and rolling around on the floor and I'm just ah ... you know, I wonder. Maybe worry isn't the right word, but I definitely wonder if somebody's going to knock on the principal's door and say, "Do you know what Lily's doing?" But they haven't yet.

This is not the kind of activity that Lily or her principal could point to on a curriculum document. Despite that vulnerability, Lily's experience has been more to the contrary. Her students attend synagogue-school three days a week and she only teaches the Sunday part of the program. The reality is the students want to spend more time with her. She tells me, "I mean every year by November [the children are] begging me to teach Mondays and Wednesdays ... there'd been a couple of years where their parents asked, too." In Lily's work there are the extraordinary, spirited capacities of spontaneity, originality, and inventiveness. She has the genius of "esteemed greatest [in her] department."

Buber (1947/1965) writes:

Only in his whole being, in all his spontaneity can the educator truly affect the whole being of his pupil. For educating characters you do not need a moral genius, but you do need a man who is wholly alive and able to communicate himself directly to his fellow beings. His aliveness streams out to them and affects them most strongly and purely when he has no thought of affecting them. (p. 105)

This sums up the synthesis between spontaneity and genius that describes the synagogue-school teacher. Students respond, energize a partnership, and invigorate a teacher in an atmosphere charged with the force of spontaneity. It is a special kind of genius, one of attunement to others, the give and take of discourse. It is also an energetic presence that draws in and drives forward. Lily and her colleagues' work is the product of genius.

Genius At Work

Usually we can blip through this part and get right into *Avot*, but this class was fascinated with the concept of how hard it can be to pray with sincerity and how difficult it is to say these Hebrew words with meaning and devotion every time we say the *Amidah*. I found myself playing the part of moderator more than teacher. Kids went back and forth on just how to make words meaningful for oneself and not become rote or routine. This discussion went past Jewish prayer and into their own lives. Examples included how, “I love you” becomes mundane after Mom/Dad has said it for the billionth time. How, “I’m sorry,” also loses meaning because we say it so easily. (Rachel)

As I visit their classrooms, read their essays and engage in conversation, among the themes that emerge is the independence synagogue-school teachers have, for spontaneity and improvisation, to interpret or create curricular goals, and the freedom to introduce material that goes beyond the formal textbook. This is an aspect of their genius and greatness in this special occupation. An operant term in Rachel’s comment above is “this class.” After years of teaching this material, a “fascination” with an unexpected aspect of the prayer gives rise to a detour in the lesson. That her role of teacher transforms into “moderator,” keeping discussion moving forward in an undetermined direction, supports Holtz’s (2003) suggestion that the cultural climate, social currents, “the power of the milieu ... influence ... the teacher’s understanding of the subject matter itself” (p. 15). As I further explore this phenomenon, I ask myself, are these teachers given to demonstrate a 21st century sensitivity to the sacred text they teach? Is the influence of a sophisticated, upper middle class, suburban society shaping this experience of teaching sacred text? Is there a special form of genius at play in the work of the synagogue-school teacher of sacred text?

The project of making religious text, crafted in a distant time and place, engaging and relevant calls on inner resources that define genius. Just as Shakespeare’s plays are

sometimes adapted to modern settings or the language is made contemporary, Holtz (2003) constructs three scenarios under which Jewish sacred text is in essence, “rewritten” (p.15) in the synagogue-school classroom. One way may be considered an assertive act of defiance, a rejection of the concept or authority of an “authentic tradition” (p. 15). Lily relates this experience of teaching a *parsha* (weekly portion) describing the clothes worn by the *kohanim* (priests):

One of the girls asked, “Well, can it be a girl?” and I said, “Well, in fact there weren’t female *kohanim*.” And she was kind of a little distraught. I was like that’s what it was I didn’t have to feel bad, I didn’t have to feel anti-feminist or I didn’t have to feel like I was teaching something wrong. I was only teaching what it was. But you know, I had this backup that in fact there were not female *kohanim*, end of discussion. I said, but if you want to make yours a female, feel free, and she did with the high heels and long hair and she had a great time.

Here is the sacred text being rewritten, the role of a priest, gender bent in a way that practice, tradition, or history would not have allowed. The child is assertively defying what is the “authentic tradition,” perhaps in a similar way to Amy Eilberg, who becomes the first female rabbi to be ordained in the Conservative movement in 1985. This is a rewrite of more than a two millennia old glass ceiling over that successor role of spiritual leadership. In the lingo of the Conservative movement, it is the assertion of change over tradition, always a ground breaking moment. Lily, equally, asserts the authority of the text, but also allows that boundary to be breached for the sake of a curricular goal that appears in no official document guiding her teaching. It is an independent decision, a spontaneous improvisation within an activity that is, by its very nature, free flowing and open ended. This is a teacher stepping out of the way of a contemporary rejection of gender specific roles, where moms are doctors, lawyers, and the modern equivalent of

kohanim, rabbis. It is a genius borne of a comfort with straying into the uncertainty of an uncharted course.

A second scenario in which the *Torah* is rewritten, that Holtz (2003) holds as more common, is a teacher believing “in his or her mind [what he/she is teaching] is the tradition” (p. 16). Over the course of this investigation, and well before, I have frequent experiences with teachers presenting as the word of *Torah*, *midrashic* material more at home with a traditionally observant community than in the Conservative congregations in which this investigation takes place. Holtz (2003) explains this as the power of the “*midrashic* mode of reading” (p. 16). Janet demonstrates this point:

Noah was good and righteous ... and we talk about what it means to walk with God ... They’ve had the example that Abraham was the one who questioned the idols in his father’s shop ... Abraham ... walked with God.

There is a familiarity and sanctity to these stories of Noah and Abraham that charges past the boundaries of denominational agendas as subtly as well crafted propaganda. Used as the basis for classroom discussion, these two “good and righteous ... [men who] walked with God” offer compelling narratives for advancing important understandings of our relationships *bein adam l’makom* (between people and God) and *bein adam l’havero* (between people). A point to be made is that in introducing Abraham’s “father’s [idol] shop” to the lesson, Janet blurs the distinction between the *Torah*’s text and the *midrash*, stories originally beyond the margins of the *Torah* scroll, but frequently woven into the canonized writings, in essence rewriting “the tradition” in the classroom. In illustrating Holtz’s point, she is far from alone in this practice and swept along by a powerful force, the “*midrashic* mode of reading” (Holtz, 2003, p. 16). It is a recurring pattern that occurs with a multitude of texts and traditions. This dynamic crosses the boundary between a

faithful open ended exploration of *Torah* and a skewed, traditional, interpretation of the text. It is a case in Holtz's point, of teachers acting according to what they believe to be accurate, while in reality perpetuating a particularistic understanding of the text. I interpret this as a confrontation with the limits of my conversants' genius, a submission to conventionality.

Holtz's (2003) third scenario is the more above ground, "self conscious rereading of the past" (p. 17). This is openly approaching these ancient texts with modern sensibilities, interpreting them given the concerns of the day. In the experience I present at the beginning of this section, Rachel writes about the discussion she facilitates prior to focusing on developing mastery of a particular prayer, the *Avot*. While the discussion typically is brief, she exercises the independence to let the children continue the dialogue, deciding that the discourse is at least as good a use of time as moving on to the technical reading skill that was the original intent of the lesson. When she went farther afield, bushwhacking into "their own lives," her students' understanding of the material crystallized. A student offers her insight:

Jen A. raised her hand ... and said something to the effect of "That's what *kavannah* (intent) is." She went on to explain that, "It's the intention behind the words that holds all the meaning." (Rachel)

On this day, Rachel enters the classroom with the intent to carry out a lesson centered on developing a technical skill. Her intention is a typical, common exercise in developing reading fluency of a Hebrew prayer. This process is independent of the reality that the language is an arcane version of a vernacular that is only an everyday tongue for a little over a century, after a more than two millennia hibernation, in the distant home country of six million Jewish people, Israel. Her foray is an act of independence that opens an

avenue to make this prayer, which is traditionally recited three times daily, in any way meaningful to a group of seventh graders. I call attention to this distinct aspect of genius, independence, as I further explore the lived experience of these teachers of sacred text and describe how they are “esteemed greatest in [this particular] department.”

Janet teaches *Torah*. Her textbook begins with “The Creation,” chapter one, verse one, “In the beginning ...” It is a widely used book from a prominent publisher of synagogue-school textbooks. Broken into chapters, it is a translation and distillation of the original text. While a faithful, well researched rendering, judgment was made to edit out stories, or parts of stories, with the third or fourth grade audience in mind. Janet relates:

I have my *Heroes of Jewish History*. I will read them in short paragraphs. That gives them even more detail. Like in Joseph, they know, and it is not in *The Child’s Bible*, but my kids know about Potiphar and they know about the baker. Because in *The Child’s Bible* it only tells about the grapes, the grapes being pressed and the butler going back to his job. It says nothing about the baker, and to me I want the kids to know, I mean, both ... he was right on both.

Janet expresses her independence by adding layers of depth to a static, synthesized, some might say sanitized, text. In the *Torah*, Joseph interprets the dreams of two prisoners, the butler and the baker. He says that the butler will be released from prison and restored to his former position and that the baker will be executed. It offends Janet’s sensibilities that the textbook leaves out the part about the baker, and so she goes about rewriting that narrative into the story. Her familiarity and enthusiasm for the material enables her to facilitate the students’ connecting the themes between subject areas. She says:

My feeling is, the more connections the kids make between *tefillah* and the Bible, or between one Bible story and another Bible story, or between a holiday that we’re celebrating ... I think the kids realize that these different prayers, stories,

they don't happen in a vacuum; that they are all connected. And to me that's the beauty of doing all of this ... there is a thread that is running from the Bible stories to *tefillah*, to the holidays, to *tikkun olam*.

An aspect of the genius of her teaching is facilitating students' recognizing these interconnections. In one lesson, Janet describes her questioning:

When we did the *Barchu* and the *minyan* ... and I just said to them, "Where does the ten come from?" And, at least half of them or more raised their hand.

This is a discussion of the traditionally interpreted relationship between the ten people needed for a prayer quorum and its origin in the story of Abraham. Janet brings to her teaching knowledge stories beyond those offered in the textbook and sensitivity to the unity of text and traditional practice.

A dimension of this independence is "Resoluteness" a quality which Heidegger (1927/1962) describes as "authentic Being-one's-Self" (p. 344) and "the loyalty of existence to its own Self" (p. 443). Janet is living out an independence to chart her own path. She has a long-standing relationship with the text and has situated herself where she can bring this text to life. She knows that the assigned textbook is deficient, just as the students' preliminary understanding of the narrative is, at best, superficial. She lives what she teaches, bringing *all her might* to guiding a meaningful exploration of this narrative. To do otherwise would be inauthentic and disloyal. She brings a *resoluteness* that has its source in the core of her Being. What is the nature of the interface between the synagogue-school teacher's independent, authentic self and the Being of Others?

Forces of Nature

The daily news is full of stories in which forces of nature are imposed on human civilization. These reminders show there are powers beyond our ability to develop cities, explore beyond earth's gravitational pull, and insulate ourselves from what insurance

companies describe as “acts of God.” Our penchant for building homes in areas known for hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanoes, and earthquakes may speak of a *chutzpah* (nerve, daring) of a high order, an appreciation for our ephemeral existence, or a faith in our capacity to adjust to circumstance. The teacher of sacred text lives a balance, perhaps more accurately, off balance or imbalance between competing, conflicting forces of nature. Destabilizing energies are inherent and include the students, content of instruction, school administration, the teachers themselves, and a multitude of other foreseen and unforeseen influences. Terry says:

The process of teaching [prayer], it changes every day. If the class is in a good mood, I can cover a lot of new vocabulary words and I can point them to these lines and say okay, now that you see that, what do you think that line is saying?

Terry communicates a relationship in which there is a dynamic flow. Like her colleagues, she comes to school, lesson plan in hand, a vision of how the presentation will unfold, and, being an experienced teacher, it is often a lesson that has been presented several times over. It is the nature of the synagogue-school, where the goal is the encounter, that in the interactions with text, moderated by a teacher, steps are not necessarily walked through as if the destination was an end point on a map. In reality, the journey is the lesson’s objective. Synagogue-school teachers adapt to an environment which Sartre (1943/1956) describes as, “The being which I am preserves a certain indetermination, a certain unpredictability” (p. 238). The “I” is the teacher, the students, and the milieu. This sets up a collision of forces, the teacher’s *resoluteness* interacting with a similar loyalty of existence on the part of every other Self with which she comes into contact. The students’ unpredictability and indetermination becomes her unpredictability and indetermination. What is the dynamic of these influences? In what new directions does it

send the teacher? Where does *resoluteness* begin and where does it end? Sartre

(1943/1956) finds “independence” in the in-between of “Reflected-on and reflective”:

The reflective nihilation, however, is pushed further than that of the pure for-itself as a simple self-consciousness. (p. 274)

Janet’s *resoluteness* manifests itself in a consciousness of what is missing from the textbook and replacing that nothingness with what she understands as an impediment to the students’ appreciating the narrative. Restoring the butler to his position is of great significance to the narrative; however, Janet cannot teach this story without bringing in the baker. To do otherwise is to cheat her students of the real meaning of the text and to put in place an equilibrium that would be left to her as disequilibrium, and a negating of Self. As Sartre (1943/1956) describes it:

In self-consciousness, in fact, the two terms of the dyad “reflected-reflecting” were so incapable of presenting themselves separately that the duality remained perpetually evanescent and each term while positing itself for the other became the other. (p. 274)

Janet and the material she teaches come close to fusing into a single entity. Just as the *Torah* also is referred to as “The Five Books of Moses,” the teacher becomes the embodiment of the text. Jewish sacred text is content that captivates the reader in unusual ways, and the teacher who is passionate about this text, gives herself over to being drawn into its world. The two are separate, but inseparably living on an evanescent division:

But with reflection the case is different since the “reflection-reflecting” which is reflected-on exists for a “reflection-reflecting” which is reflective. Reflected-on and reflective, therefore each tend toward independence, and the nothing which separates them tends to divide them more profoundly than the nothingness which the For-itself has to be separates the reflection from the reflecting. (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 274)

Ultimately, there is a profound disengagement, a shift in the forces of nature, like magnetic poles shifting. Up becomes down, down becomes up; what attracted, repels,

what repelled, attracts; and there is a nothing that creates independence. The dyad is held in tension. Teacher is for the text as text is for the teacher. Similarly, teacher is for the student as student is for the teacher. One does not exist without the other. They are the reflected-on and the reflective. The teacher regards the student as much for her Being as for her nothingness. This is the nothingness of not yet knowing, not yet having grappled with the text, and not yet making the text personally meaningful. The teacher's nothingness is not yet having engaged in this exercise with this group of students, this year. Joyce speaks of this progression:

The neat thing about 7th grade is they come in as 6th graders and by the time they leave their critical thinking skills, they're really up to the 8th grade level. They moved so fast this year and it's, it's exciting.

The reflective nihilation is a compelling force in the synagogue-school classroom. The teacher is participant in both a personal journey and in the students' journey. The teacher is also Being for-itself, living a text that is persistently a reminder of being and non-being. The in-itself of the teacher of sacred text is evident in the declaration, "I love Bible" (Janet). It is an "actuality" (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 74) of a passionate connection to this body of literature.

Janet is engaged in a significant exercise of freedom in straying from the formal confines of the textbook. As a force of nature, it would be like the challenge offered to travelers by a storm activated by a dense cold front meeting a lower density warm front. The variations in temperature and density could represent the interface between levels of religious observance, attachment to the content, or the proximity of the material to the original source text.

Sartre (1943/1956) speaks of freedom as a negation, the dismissal of a barrier:

Thus the empirical and practical concept of freedom is wholly negative; it issues from the consideration of a situation and establishes that this situation leaves me free to pursue this or that end. One might say even that this situation conditions my freedom in the sense that the situation is there in order not to constrain me. Remove the prohibition to circulate in the streets after the curfew, and what meaning can there be for me to have the freedom ... to take a walk at night? (p. 462)

The freedom being exercised is the disregard of constraints in the pursuit of a purpose higher than a breath of fresh air in the evening. Sartre explores the possibility of the Other as that restraining force (1943/1956). For my conversants it would be hard to identify a formal limitation. For Janet it is not in evidence. What could spark that presence and provoke a restructuring of the lifeworld of my conversants? There is certainly provocative potential in their practice.

Fundamental to Lily's pedagogy is disruption: "to ask ... to think a different way is harder for them, and I think that they are confused at first, and not all of them are willing to do it all [the] time." What is the barrier to Janet's introducing a discussion of capital punishment or Potiphar's wife's efforts to seduce Joseph to her third graders? Once the dialogue has strayed from the well charted curricular path, to where will it lead? Where we had a hole in the Joseph narrative regarding the baker's fate, the *Torah's* text in this story is explicit: "In three days Pharoah will lift off your head and impale you upon a pole; and the birds will pick off your flesh" (*Torah, Bereshit* 40:19). An educational administrator could expect the teacher to be faithful to the textbook and follow the directions of the Teacher's Guide. In reality, Janet's principal gives her the encouragement to make use of both her independent judgment and the original text. This is another aspect of her genius being "esteemed," and an across the board respect for her extraordinary capacities. Is this what parents, most of whom have children enrolled in a

highly structured public school system, would expect and accept? Parents could take umbrage at the teacher straying from the inoffensive base narrative and at stimulating a child's mind to contemplate the baker's demise.

Rachel also has negotiated the space between the formality of set curriculum and creative freedom. She relates:

I was talking with [my co-teacher] on the way in about how lucky we are that our Director lets us take the course where we want to take it. And so in 10 years I have taught a lot of different things in a lot of different ways and to her it is not about the curriculum, it is about the end product. And I have appreciated that because seventh grade deserves a lot of flexibility, you know; I have had some really bad textbooks and if I had had to stick with those textbooks, then what would they have gotten? They would have gotten more rigidity and walked away hating Hebrew school. And you know, it is not going to make them marry Jewish in 10 years.

Rachel has created two significant goals, an “end product” that is connected to the curriculum and one for which she is consciously planting slowly germinating seeds, Jewish marriage. Rachel appreciates the need for flexibility and the importance of creating a classroom environment in which the experience of being a part of the synagogue-school is satisfying. She lives a level of observance that extends beyond the material she was assigned to teach, and a vision for her students for which she has no expectation of taking credit. She is a type of bushwhacker, that in American Civil War parlance came to mean, “irregular combatants who took to the woods, and were variously regarded as patriot guerillas, or as bush-rangers and banditti; a bush-fighter” (*OED Online*). She diverges from the safe path and the sheltering protection afforded by the respect afforded a textbook.

Rachel's is the genius of originality, a comfort with the discomfort of expanding beyond the frontiers of the predictable exploration of Jewish study. If the regular

expectation would be sticking with the textbook and formal curriculum, she has made of herself an “irregular combatant.” She is a patriot guerilla, waging a battle against assimilation into the mythic American melting pot. In an essay, she writes, “I often say that all I want out of teaching is for at least *one* of my students to choose to stay Jewish after college (by this I mean a practicing, observant Jew who marries Jewish and chooses to raise their kids Jewish), and perhaps remember how their strange seventh grade teacher touched them and helped them realize the importance of being Jewish.” It is another expression of the genius of the synagogue-school teacher, that “rarer species of intellectual power” who has a vision beyond the horizon of today’s lesson. Clearly, Rachel is working toward a goal that does not lend itself to be measured in a quantifiable way on a quiz, mid-term, or end of the year exam.

The Profundity of a Twelve-Year-Old

וַאֲמַלְא אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים
בְּחָכְמָה וּבְתִבּוּנָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכָל-מְלָאכָה (שמות לא,ג)

And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all kinds of workmanship. (*Torah, Shemot 31:3 Hertz*)

This quote from the *Torah* is the earliest documented reference to what we call “God given talent.” The subject is the Biblical narrative’s first artist, Betzalel. His name means “In the Shadow of God,” a positive connotation as in being protected or watched over. In the Biblical narrative, Betzalel has been singled out and stands well above a cadre of similarly gifted craftsmen. Their talents are behind the making of the Holy Ark, the priestly garments, and the tent of assembly. What it means to be filled with the spirit of God is formulated as a combination of intellectual capacities, wisdom, knowledge, and understanding; and dexterous, artistic skill. In my earlier explorations of the etymology of

genius are parallel references to spirit, artistry, and special endowments. The story I am telling is of the work of genius that takes place in the synagogue-school classroom. It is a partnership of teachers and students filling that classroom space with these attributes of the “spirit of God.”

Many of the dynamics that shaped the Israelites in the 40 years in the wilderness portrayed in the *Torah* are reflected in the synagogue-school classroom. The tent of assembly is the precursor to King Solomon’s Temple and the modern synagogue. It is the first consecrated, sacred space in which the Israelites came together. As with any collection of people, individual personalities emerge, make their presence felt, and influence the group identity. There are challenges, circumstances, internal and external forces that drive individuals to make variations on choices to contribute to the collective’s purpose, or to stir divisiveness toward a different agenda, or create anarchy.

Michelle says, “This group as a group was always just on the brink of chaos ... It wouldn’t take an awful lot of encouragement.” Like the sometimes rebellious, sometimes obedient Israelites Moses leads through a less than hospitable, desert terrain, the synagogue-school teacher is charged with unifying the diversity of talents and traits, selfishness or selflessness, to contribute to a communal project, *Torah U’Mitzvot*, Jewish study leading to action. In our group conversation, Michelle talks about such a diverse collective:

The smarter kids, I mean, obviously it’s wonderful to see a really bright kid just soar, just take off, and just, you know, before you can get the word, the words or the tune out of your mouth. He or she has got it. It’s wonderful to see, but it isn’t necessarily the most gratifying, at least not for me. For me, what’s really the most gratifying when a child who has really struggled ... and sometimes has been resistant to persevering through the struggle, finally gets to the other side of the mountain, and that sense of pride and elation that that child feels about, ‘Yeah! I can do this!’ For the bright kids to say, ‘I can do this!’, ‘Yeah, so what else is

new', but for those kids to say, 'I can do this!', 'Phew!' there is nothing like that. That's the one thing and the other thing is when there is a child who maybe never really does ... get to the other side of that mountain on ... let's say ... the mechanical reading of the *Ashrei* ... That when we were discussing these prayers that those kids ... can make a contribution to the discussion that is so deep and so rich and so meaningful that they can feel that they got it even if they didn't get it the same way the other kids got it. It is just enough to make you a little tipsy.

These children are a vision of the Jewish future, a reflection of a congregation assembled for prayer. They represent, to varying degrees the people who have become most comfortable with the liturgy, the *hazzan* and the rabbi. Like the *hazzan*, there are children with a talent for learning the tunes and keeping to the melody. Even in a sanctuary filled with discordant, atonal harmonies they sing out the prayers with passion and power. As the rabbi, the spiritual leader, there are those fully engaged with bringing forward the depth and richness of the prayers and textual readings. This diverse group of students also lives *betzalel*-Betzalel. Their comfort with talking about God indicates a sense of being "in the shadow of God." Their enthusiasm also gives evidence of emulating that first artist, demonstrating how they are "filled with the spirit of God." These students are like that "mixed multitude" (*Torah, Shemot* 12:38) that Moses led out of Egypt and evolved into a nation governed by teachings passed on to them from God to Moses.

Of the teacher's role, Joyce says:

Oh, they're incredible. They're wonderful kids, they really are. And they're here for each other ... You might think my prime goal is teaching them, but my prime goal is that they should form a community so that they will stay in touch with each other and have Jewish friends.

This attitude is contrary to the way "school" is constructed in the American consciousness: rigid, quantifiable, test centered, and competitive. Rachel mirrors her colleagues' disdain for rote memorization in the public schools and makes reference to a mnemonic device used to memorize the names of the five books of the *Torah*:

They have to memorize so much in [public] school and how much of it stays with them? Do they really remember the capital of North Carolina ... I don't even have them for five hours a week ... So we will do fun things, and then play Jewpardy out the wazoo because if they can remember, General Electric light bulbs never dim ... well, that's something.

The creative energy of my conversants, and the spirit to which their students respond, is to shape a different kind of classroom process, an inherently Jewish one, intent on developing lasting relationships and creating community.

Rachel's goal, focused on "at least one of my students," is as much poetic as it is literal. By conjecture, to have moved one child toward her objective, others, having been participants to the discourse, will be similarly influenced. Janet relates a class discussion about Friday night home rituals for *Shabbat*, "What you want to do is to have one of the total nonobservant kids go home and just say to their mom and dad, 'Can we have *Shabbat*?' and they're hearing it from another kid, not from me." Over time, these teachers create a classroom community. Like any community, there are ethics and values even beyond those taught as direct products of the sacred texts being explored. There are also community standards that develop among a group of children in the years leading up to these teachers receiving a class roster with their names on it. For example, Michelle describes a student as the "class clown," a role everyone in the room comes to expect of that student. There are many other roles and combined they create a class personality.

Joyce tells me:

Well, I mean, you learn because every class is a different composition and you have to fine tune what you're doing to the speed of the class. And sometimes, I use *brit milah* as an example, sometimes I can teach it straight up. Sometimes I leave out a lot of information because they're just not mature enough.

This is an aspect of the teacher's attunement to the nature of the community of learners with which they have been presented. Sometimes the class is like Janet's where there is

active, energetic participation where she says, “I love it when there is so much enthusiasm and the kids are just calling out.” The teacher, then, is challenged to find ways to enrich the content of instruction. Other times, in classes like Joyce’s, the need is to simplify the material. While Rachel articulates an objective beyond immediate assessment, Joyce also has grappled with that aspect of teaching:

Well some of it has to be my expectation. I don’t give them tests, you know. They do have a couple of assignments that they have to do outside. They do posters, they do speeches, they... mostly oral ways of showing that they’ve gotten what they’ve gotten. But they have so many other things going on in the seventh grade that years ago I gave up all of the traditional standards of measurement and I can tell pretty well where they are with their reading, what their language problems are. And I can tell from the feedback that I get from them individually that ... and I do have very high standards and expectations of them and they know it. And I’m not going to take a *schlock* [below second rate] answer.

These reflections provide insight into the evolution of praxis. At one time, “years ago ... traditional standards of measurement” were a part of this educational landscape. Joyce still sets “very high standards and expectations.” The material her students worked with was sufficiently challenging and engaging for a 12-year-old. One worksheet was

Talmudic text and another, a poem:

On the eve of the full moon
We search our houses
By the light of a candle
For the last trace of winter
For the last crumbs grown stale inside us
For the last darkness still in our hearts. (Gottlieb, as cited in Heschel, 1983, p. 279)

In its entirety, the above poem is an erudite exploration of a subject these seventh grade students learn about at this time of year, at some level, each of their years in the synagogue-school. Joyce is creating a learning experience transforming the traditional Passover holiday preparation of clearing the house of leaven into a philosophical,

expressive cleaning of personal flaws. This is an engaging spin on a topic that could have been a pro forma review of previous material. She has introduced material that elevates a mundane holiday preparation to the level of sacred ritual and an exploration for personal meaning. In a year of less mature learners, the less sophisticated treatment may have been her approach. Her students' response to the exercise is a measure of their comprehension of the material. Will it meet her "very high standards and expectations?" At seven months into the school year, she has deemed this class worthy and makes it clear that students have learned that she will not accept a "*schlock*" answer. It is the genius of the teacher of sacred text to develop the attunement that leads to an instinctive ongoing appraisal of her learners.

Sartre (1943/1956) writes of a "desiring consciousness" (p. 362). This term comes up in his writing about relationship to others. Of desire, he continues, "We say it takes hold of you, that it overwhelms you, that it paralyzes you" (p. 364). What is the desire that "takes hold of" these teachers? In what ways does it "overwhelm" or "paralyze"? Further, he goes on to say that "Pleasure ... is the death of desire because it is not only its fulfillment but its limit and its end" (p. 373). Teachers live in relation to their students as individuals and as a collective, the class. This lived experience carries elements of overwhelming paralysis: to drive students to recall facts; make connections between one story and another, or one lesson and another; or between the content of instruction and their personal lives. To glimpse pleasure is to see these moments of fulfillment of the teachers' mission, the pleasure of knowing that they have connected with a student, drawn something from their consciousness of which they were either well aware, such as

the game-show-buzzer quick recitation of a fact, or the more subtle reformulation of an understanding. It is a pleasure that is not the death of desire. As Rachel writes:

I was so moved by the profundity of what this 12 year old said. I felt so proud that I had helped her reach this place. So, that's why I keep teaching – even when I have a bunch of 12 year old boys who are driving me batty. Maybe, just maybe, there will be another Jen A. in this group this year.

There is always that other student who does not respond, the next student waiting to grapple with the text, or the student that needs encouragement to think about marrying Jewish as an important consideration. The “desiring consciousness” meets the “spirit of suffering and enjoying ... the spirit of pleasure and pain” in the genius of the teacher of sacred text. These teachers guide a “mixed multitude” on a spiritual journey through a holy land of sacred text. They have their Betzalels, gifted to extraordinary degrees, and others with whom they strive to help make connection to the content of instruction. In this collection of personalities they see a vision of the Jewish future, the Jewish community in all its diversity, the leaders, the followers and the tenuously engaged. They ride, like on rivers of varying degrees of challenge, amid the creation of a group identity, taking pride, pleasure, and satisfaction in being a part of children's engagement, applying their God given talents to this particular project, and their collective valuing of a special opportunity in time.

Making Time Sacred

Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time. “And God blessed the seventh *day* and made it *holy*.” (Heschel, 1951, p. 9)

In our conversation Steven says that he tells his students, “The holiday is *Shabbat*, whether you do it or not, it is *Shabbat*.” He makes this comment within the context of talking about students respecting time, connecting to Jewish time, recognizing that there

is an invisible dimension that they can connect to, and on which they can base the rhythms of their life. He is representative of my conversants in personally living this connection. For him, *Shabbat* means “I finally get to the table and we are starting *Shalom Aleichem* [a traditional song] ... my entire [body] ... I entirely just deflate from the tension.” It is a time set aside from the demands and distractions of the other six days of the week.

Synagogue-school teachers regard the one to three-hour-long blocks with their students as similarly blessed, holy time. They zealously guard against intrusions on that time, even though acknowledging the value of those events such as services, rabbi and cantor talks, and music sessions. Their students can choose to make it meaningful. To paraphrase Steven, the *shabbat* is class, whether you participate or not, it is class. There are teachers who initiate their lessons with a thought or review question; others begin with *tefillah* and others who start with *la’asok b’divre Torah*, a blessing thanking God for the *mitzvah* “to engage in the study of *Torah*.” Steven says:

There is so little time and this is one thing I say to them when they get me annoyed and they waste time, there are “168 hours in a week ... four of them [you] are devoting to [your] religion.” [This is] nothing for something that is so important that you do as much as you can in that little amount of time.

This speaks of a consciousness of the boundaries of classroom time, layered over a built-in conflict between the pace of working through material Steven wants to set, the window of time in which he operates, and the degree to which his students are in harmony with those rhythms.

One of the limitations of a synagogue-school is the time of day, where Monday-Thursday classes are usually held in a two-hour block somewhere around 4:00 pm - 6:00 pm. Joyce says that “The school has rules and I have rules ... [one of which is] you come

to school whether you're late or not. Don't not come because you're going to be late. I'd rather that you came, you were late, you had a concert, you had this. If you had to leave early that's okay too." Here the priority is the experience of class and a not uncommon welcoming of students practically unconditionally. Rachel adds, "They all come in late on Sunday." This chips away at those classroom hours and calls on teachers to adjust to this circumstance. In his school, where classes run from 4:15-6:15, "At 6:00, when they have been there a while and they are tired, we are all tired, and they just kind of start to shut down when their pilot lights go out" (Steven). These are challenges to which synagogue-school teachers rise. Lessons are organized around the need to accommodate to late arrivals; settle down at the beginning of class, after the transition from one school to home to synagogue-school; and the necessity to keep the students focused through the end of the lesson. How is this time made sacred? How does it feel to teach in an in-between zone of time? What partnerships limit or broaden these boundaries of time?

Frustration and Time

Joyce experiences a degree of difficulty added to the challenge of the time of day.

She says:

It's frustrating. And this year it's really frustrating because we've taken two hours out of the program and, so there's no question then, I'm choosing what I'm going to [teach] ... I have to choose to emphasize rather than covering the whole nine yards.

Some of this frustration is a reflection on the general limitation on how much can be taught in a few hours a week. This feeling is also the product of a struggle within the Conservative movement over the number of weekly hours of instruction required of a third through seventh grade student. Joyce has experienced the transition from when the unassailable standard was three days a week of two-hour classes. In the Greater

Washington region, that configuration only exists in a few schools, replaced by two-day programs meeting for a total of four to five hours in total. An element of the frustration is what is communicated, overtly or covertly, by a parent who demands fewer hours for their child's Jewish education; that in the scale of priorities this is not uppermost. The benefit of the doubt is usually erased when the request is made to shift a child from a Tuesday or Wednesday class in order to conform to a soccer practice schedule or to leave early to make that athletics commitment. I have no doubt that these frustrations are not in evidence in the classroom. Rachel says, "It's not fair to blame kids. I get frustrated with the parents."

Another aspect of this frustration is that the cutback in teaching hours was not accompanied by a formal curriculum review that decided what material should continue to be a priority and what parts of the journey from September - June should be struck from the itinerary. Is the message from the synagogue leadership, "We don't care what you teach," "We trust you to make this decision," indecision, benign neglect, or some of all four? Is there an expectation to fit the material that took six hours to teach into four hours? Rachel, who teaches in a different school from Joyce, looks at the hopes of the parents, lay and professional leadership and says, "That's too heavy a role to put on someone who only spends five hours a week with these kids."

Here we have teachers with years of life experience with making personal meaning of Jewish sacred text. They are skilled at conveying this material to students. They have seen the rainbow-like arc of a life cycle enriched by a connection between being part of a modern, secular society and a sacred community unified by *Torah*. Sartre (1943/1956) writes, "Consciousness confronts its past and its future as facing a self which

it is in the mode of not-being” (p. 34). Consciousness is an essence of synagogue-school teaching. In a sense it is a *Shabbat*-like island in time, the clarity that accompanies the screening off of all distractions. Frustration and time reveal the challenge of calling on students to suspend the accumulated pressures that have been hurtling them through the day. They live from task-to-task, but yet are expected to not-be a part of that race for the sake of a Jewish study—*shabbat*. As a lived experience it is frustrating to have the task to which they commit themselves, past and future, devalued or invalidated, or the “not-being” recognized of engaging in an impossible task.

Frustration, Time, and Carrying The Lesson Beyond the Classroom Walls

Most of them don’t keep *Shabbat*. (Lynn)

One way that the boundaries of classroom time are breached is through support in the home of what goes on in the school. A frequently expressed feeling Rachel articulates is, “I get frustrated with the parents’ laziness.” Some of the frustration is with parents’ lack of keeping the classroom discourse going after school. In other ways it is not reinforcing review of material presented in class. Of particular significance is that the instruction of traditions or rituals is not met with the actual performance of those *mitzvot*. Synagogue-school teachers’ work is significantly tied in with a consciousness of what Sartre (1943/1956) defines as “*ekstasis*” (p. 113). The dimensions of “*ekstasis*” are:

1. To not-be what it is,
2. To be what it is not,
3. To be what it is not and to not-be what it is—within the unity of a perpetual referring. (p. 113)

Just as *ekstasis* is driven toward disclosure or discovery, engagement in Jewish study is a perpetual exercise in self-discovery, personal change, and evolution from not-being to being. Joyce brings up this dynamic in this description:

As the teacher, I feel conflicted about telling them how to circumvent their parents—even though what I teach them is Jewish practice and the policy of their synagogue. I do say that traditional Jews change everything in their kitchens and that others strive to climb a ladder adding a new observance every year or two.

There is frustration in the experience of having students leaving the classroom curious, motivated and energized to apply what they have learned in the classroom only to have it fade into non-being when they get home. Michelle feels this frustration in devoting hours of time, energy, and passion to teaching Passover. There is a great deal of material to draw on since the resonance of this holiday and its historic centrality to Jewish life can hardly be overstated. *Shabbat* and daily prayers that teachers present over the course of the year make reference to the Exodus from Egypt. The Ten Commandments, a subject covered at some point in the year at almost every grade level, begins, “I the Lord am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods besides Me” (*Torah, Shemot* 20:2-3).

An exercise I see Michelle’s students engaging in with 15 different versions of the *Haggadah*, the sacred text that is read at the ritual meal at the beginning of this week long spring festival, demonstrates great diversity of interpretations of form and substance. Perspectives, including denominational (Orthodox, Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist), feminist, new age, Zionist, child friendly, and humanist are all introduced. The *Seder* (the Passover ritual meal) is often occasion for interfaith gatherings, particularly synagogues and African-American churches, since the story of going from slavery to freedom is a unifying theme with powerful resonance for both of those faith communities. The holiday is primarily a family based, at home celebration, as opposed to a synagogue centered observance. Nonetheless, Michelle talks about following up on these lessons after the holiday:

I said to them ... share one thing, that is important or interesting or memorable or fun about your Pesach-Spring Break. And virtually every kid, not every kid, but you know, 85% of them ... “I went on a cruise,” “I went to the mountains.” Some of them did say ... “I went to Florida to my grandparents” or whatever. And if I said, “So, did you have *Seder* there?”, “Well, we had Pesach dinner ...” “We had dinner with matzah,” something along those lines. And that made me sad ... I grew up in a Conservative home ... I can't even imagine my parents considering not having a *Seder* ... So, I guess that was the thing that made me like sad that there were so few that actually acted on the stuff that we had learned.

This sadness is another form of frustration. It is teaching something that is a part of your being, sharing a passion with your students in the expectation that it will enhance the meaning of their experience of the *seder*. It is a frustration of having hope and anticipation shattered like visiting a once beautiful site that has decayed through neglect. Heidegger (1927/1962) writes, “Only the particular Dasein decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting” (p. 33).

Michelle's experience is like that of an environmental scientist studying the Arctic ice cap. The extraordinary region she hopes will be cared for is comprised of religious traditions and rituals. Her being rebuffed by political leaders or inaction comes in the form of parents who don't give life to these special celebrations. Just as the vitality of the Arctic glaciers contributes to the health of everyone on the planet, and the melting of the polar caps would be an irrevocable loss that must be forestalled, she and her colleagues believe that Judaism also has a contribution to make to all humanity. The degradation of religious observance is a potential irrevocable loss. The frustration of the environmental scientist, who seeks to preserve the earth's natural treasures, is the frustration of the synagogue-school teacher.

Frustration in the Face to Face Encounter

Parents feed teacher frustration when they are not supportive of the teacher's professionalism. Janet tells me about a parent complaining of his child being resistant to going to synagogue-school classes. Her reaction was:

I felt sort of wounded. I felt like saying ... "Mr. Goldstein, I really am a good teacher. I don't know what's going on with your son, but this is clearly not me."

She persists in her teaching, more aware of this child's feelings. At what point does this student's attitude change? A few months later, Janet has another kind of conversation with Mr. Goldstein in which he says, "He just sits with me [and practices the Hebrew] ... He has really learned a lot this year and it has been really great." Furthering her frustration, this parent wants to attribute his child's change in attitude to a change on the part of Janet's teaching. She thinks he has it backwards. Janet tells me:

I'm very diplomatic and I did not say, "But I also think because you are involved and you are going over what he is doing and he is coming prepared, that is making a difference ... I felt very good and I sort of felt I got a parent [on my side] and maybe he saw, and I'm sure he did, that at this point maybe [it] was not totally the teacher [but] because [he] got involved and [his] son started to respond.

Janet expresses a frustration with knowing how much more her students can get out of their classroom experience when there is parent support. Her teaching of Hebrew is not the focused attention on a holiday that will come and go according to the calendar, but *tefillah*, prayers that are recited daily. She sees the transformation from an unprepared, unhappy student to an enthusiastic member of the class when there is follow-up in the home. There is also a degree of frustration with a parent either not recognizing or not acknowledging what had been the source of the problem. The wound of the criticism is still unhealed.

Teachers frequently refer to this kind of parent attitude. There are the parents who drop their children off, pick them up two hours later, don't set foot in the building, and don't connect in any meaningful way with the rhythms of Jewish time. It is not fair to paint Mr. Goldstein in this light. His professional work has him out of the country for weeks at a time. Several of my faculty members describe their lessons as paralleling this verse talking of a battle between Israelite soldiers and a vicious foe, "When Moses held up his hand ... Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed" (*Torah, Shemot* 17:11). Just as teachers play that role in keeping their students focused on the lesson, parents, too, must keep their hands raised. When the Mr. Goldsteins get involved in their children's Jewish studies, their children's studies flourish. Sartre (1943/1956) writes, "Freedom, which manifests itself through anguish, is characterized by constantly renewed obligation to remake the *Self* which designates the free being" (pp. 34-35). A corner was turned for Janet, Mr. Goldstein, and Nick by a particular remake in relationships. The anguish that spread like a blight on the *Dasein* of these three becomes a force for change, reshaping the experience of teaching, learning and parenting.

Getting Beyond the Parents

Some teachers are more accepting of parent inattention and turn to making their time with the children an educational *Shabbat*, a break from the tumult and demands on children's attention. Lynn says:

They are becoming teenagers. That is the important thing in their life, especially in the 6th grade, you know. The important thing in their life is text messaging and learning to give and take teasing and that kind of stuff. And you can see that they are interested, but they are not ready to make a commitment.

Her response to the frustration of competing for her students' attention is recognition and confrontation with that competition. She knows that she has piqued their attention. It is

taking that step toward committing to their studies that is her project. There is a frustration in seeing her students wading into the stream up to the waist and then backing out, not because of the cold or discomfort, but for the possible missed opportunities that would come of going with the flow. She says that “Sometimes [it is] absolute frustration” getting her students engaged. Is it a source of wonder that the interest is even there, competing between possible commitments? The frustration of the moment is for Lynn to be within reach of success, but not quite getting there. Heschel (1951) writes, “One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word *qadosh* [*kaddosh*], holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine” (p. 9). Her commitment to teaching is fueled by a sense that the content of instruction, the lessons to be learned from these sacred texts, is more valuable than anything that could win her students over at this time.

Steven experiences this student ambivalence, too:

They don’t dislike being there, I just think ... I don’t think they dislike being there at all. I think they just really sometimes are not sure why they’re there.

This is a frustration of experiencing their students’ in-betweenness that has them coming to synagogue-school with a socially constructed understanding of education based on the ritual they experience for six hours a day, one hundred and eighty days a year. They see a teaching institution that is not in any formal way going to get them into advance placement classes, an elite university, or a car as impressive as the one their parents drive. Theirs is the frustration of a unique challenge, a school where the motivation to achieve comes from a spiritual source, and most standards of achievement are internally validated. As Lily continues to reflect frustration with teaching, her disappointment shifts to optimism: “I feel like I should have done a million different things ... and it would

have worked if I had done it this way.” This is rising to the challenge of making time meaningful, appreciating the sanctity of time, holy time that is set aside from ordinary mundane experience. Steven’s awareness of the importance of this dedicated time is evidenced in his comment, “They don’t need to know this for life ... I mean, they need to know it like not for a profession, but they need to know it for who they are.”

Heidegger (1927/1962) posits, “The question of existence never gets straightened out except through existence itself” (p. 33). This is the experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting. It is being a participant in the ultimate experiment in nation building, question-by-question. It is an iconoclastic, radical exercise in re-defining learning, redefining schooling. Lily articulates what brings these teachers of sacred text to the boundary between the frustration of an endless journey and the promised land of the success they hope to achieve with their students:

I’m looking for ... open reception. Yeah! That’s it! Somebody who is willing to go somewhere that they were not going to go, if they had not come to class, that is what I’m looking for.

This is what it means to be a teacher of sacred text in a synagogue-school setting. It is for teachers to welcome students into the Abraham’s Tent we call the classroom. It is a matrix of face to face meetings: between the generations, seeing the big picture of the Jewish past, present and future, and the other grappling with the present; between text and people; and between the values of a people that have been sustained through thousands of years and the temptations of a modern society. It is extending a hand to parents, sometimes having it taken, other times not. Teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting is to create sacred time and sacred space; to experience joy, sadness, frustration, anxiety, and success; and to partner with a constellation of students in a

spiritual journey along the way, breaching boundaries and coming face to face with the knowable and the unknowable.

This is but a milestone on my journey. In a discussion of court testimony, the *Talmud* says, “May the chain of responsibility ever hang on the neck of the witness” (Sanhedrin 44b). By entering into a special relationship with my conversants I have become a witness; this chapter is my testimony. Levinas (1982/1985) adds an ethical dimension, further elaborating on this obligation: “The tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility, this moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other” (p. 97). Throughout this experience, my conversants have referred to, taught toward, and demonstrated a sense of responsibility. To put their work in Levinas’s terms, they have worked out how to accept this responsibility, and strived to “do something concrete” for their students. It is implicit in their participation in this study that they expect that their voices will echo beyond the personal moments we shared exploring the lifeworld of the synagogue-school teacher. In Chapter Five, I demonstrate my acceptance of this responsibility. It is with a measured knowing of how to assume it that I begin to articulate the pedagogical implications of this investigation. My intention is to bring about pedagogical suggestions that might help enrich the teaching of my conversants and the people they serve.

CHAPTER FIVE:

FROM THE HIGHEST MOUNTAINS TO THE LOWEST VALLEYS

וַיַּעַל מֹשֶׁה מִעֲרֵבַת מוֹאָב אֶל-הַר נֹבֹה רֹאשׁ הַפְּסָגָה ... וַיֵּרְאֵהוּ יְהוָה
אֶת-כָּל-הָאָרֶץ ... וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו זֹאת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם
לְיִצְחָק וּלְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר לְזֶרַעְךָ אֶתְנֶנָּה הָרְאִיתִיךָ בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְשָׂמָּה לֹא תַעֲבֹר
(דברים לד:א-ד)

Moses went up from the steppes of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah ... and the Lord showed him the whole land ... And the Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘I will assign it to your offspring.’ I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there.” (*Torah, Devarim 34:1-4*)

From many perspectives, synagogue-school teachers act in the role of Moses, teaching the Israelite tribes, that is, the collective of students they work with each year, the words that have been passed down from on high. Like Moses, within the tribe they have supporters, rebels, critics, and the ones struggling to bring those teachings to life. As Moses does, they respond to a call, mature into their roles, and generally maintain their vigor to the last day of the school year. Similarly, as the verse above tells us, they enjoy the long distance view, envisioning the future that awaits their charges, a holy land just beyond reach, and of their students growing into adults and living lives informed by *Torah*.

For the sake of this investigation, “the sacred” has primarily meant the holy writings that are the foundation of synagogue-school education in a Conservative congregation. The *Torah* and *tefillah* (prayer) are the sacred texts around which this study has revolved. Sacred means “set apart ... dedicated ... [or] made holy by association” (*OED Online*). Along the way, the child has also been revealed as “the sacred.” The children are “set apart” and given the attention of parents and teachers for the work in which they will engage in the synagogue and toward which the congregation will commit

resources. They are “dedicated” in the way of being devoted to their commitment, to the project of their Jewish education, and in the sense that their parents have dedicated them to their participation in that endeavor. They are “made holy” in a formal sense of being “consecrated,” ceremonially, when they begin their Jewish studies in kindergarten, and less formally through their association with holy things: the synagogue and the content of instruction, and the act of being a partner to the life of a sacred institution. This chapter addresses the meaning of teaching the sacred in relation to the pedagogical insights that have been revealed.

It is the children who proved to be the element that most defined the teachers’ classroom experiences. A section of the *Talmud* gives us a sense of an appreciation for the sacredness of children:

The Rabbis told Rabbi Joshua ben Levi: Children have come to the *Beth Hamidrash* [House of Study] and said things the like of which was not said even in the days of Joshua the son of Nun. [Thus:] *alef Beth* [means] ‘learn wisdom’ [*alef Binah*]; *Gimmel Daleth*, show kindness to the Poor [*Gemol Dallim*] ... *He, Waw*, that is the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He; *Zayyin, Heth, Teth, Yod, Kaf, Lamed*: [this sequence teaches,] and if thou doest thus, the Holy One, blessed be He, will sustain [*Zan*] thee, be gracious [*Hen*] unto thee, show goodness [*metib*] to thee, give thee a heritage [*Yerushah*], and bind a crown [*Kether*] on thee in the world to come. The open *Mem* and the closed *Mem* [denote] open teaching [*Ma’amar*] and closed [esoteric] teaching. (*Talmud, Shabbat* 104a)

This passage echoes through the millennia, showing us teachers taking enormous delight in the brilliance of their students as expressed in the demonstration of unparalleled capabilities. This particular exchange between children is an unraveling of a mnemonic connecting the Hebrew alphabet, the *aleph-bet*, to ethical principles. It can be imagined as a vigorous exchange, taking on an accelerating momentum in one-upmanship as they progress through the *aleph-bet*. My conversants express a similar excitement in emails,

progress reports, bulletin boards, faculty meetings, and almost any occasion in which students take ownership of the material and carry it to a new level of understanding.

Following the text and the students, it is my conversants and the teachers they represent who also prove to be “the sacred.” Levinas (1961/1979) writes, “The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face” (p. 78). These individuals make face time with children their priority. It is an encounter with an unlimited dimension, coming into a face to face relationship with the *B’Tzelem Elohim*, “In the image of God,” the description of all humanity in the first chapter of the *Torah* (*Bereshit* 1:27). My conversants are made holy through fulfilling *mitzvot* (commandments) in their personal lives and in their public lives, and through accepting a position of responsibility, that of synagogue-school teacher. Indeed, the fulfillment of *mitzvot* is an essential element defining what it means to be a synagogue-school teacher. The person who sets time apart for teaching is making a significant, life defining decision, one that occasionally draws them away from family and social engagement, and throws them into the life of the synagogue community in a unique way.

Choosing to teach also has the effect of setting these individuals apart in an elevated status, or at least one of holding a position of respect within the congregation, by virtue of their willingness to be dedicated to that responsibility. They are “made holy” by their special role within the community and the level of learning assumed of one holding such a status. Levinas (1961/1979) writes:

These relations, which I claim form the fabric of being itself, first come together in my discourse presently addressed to my interlocutors: inevitably across my idea of the Infinite the Other faces me—hostile, friend, my master, my student The face to face remains an ultimate situation. (p. 81)

Being a teacher is a way of relating to the world. Those students, *B'Tztelem Elohim*, are the Infinite, carrying the divine spark within. It is unknown what potential they will fulfill, but except for tragic circumstances, they will likely be a link to a chain that will connect to untold generations into the future. It is into that face that teachers turn. There are children who play those separate roles: opponent, ally, master, student, and some who play an amalgamation of those personae.

In the Biblical narrative, Moses does not come down from Mount Nebo to continue the physical and spiritual journey of the Jewish people. He passes on the mantle of leadership to Joshua who will lead the Israelites into the Promised Land where they will create a Jewish nation. Joshua is to lead a people who went from oppression to freedom. They change from having little to define them as unique, other than a belief in one all-powerful God, to a wilderness period in which they came to understand 613 laws and ordinances that would guide their constitution as a nation. The Israelites go from landless wanderers to a people holding territory at the intersection of three continents. Has Jewish history cycled back to somewhere along those continuua? Are the children contemporary Joshuas? Are my conversants Moseses, bringing a whole new definition of what it means to be an Israelite to a generation in the midst of a radical transformation?

The process of pursuing questions in this study has continually led to further questions. This is foreshadowed by van Manen (2003) saying that the hermeneutic phenomenological method “tries to ward off any tendency toward constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project ... [there is] a certain *methodos*—a way that need[s] to be discovered or invented as a response to the question at hand” (p. 29). Gadamer (1960/1999) further

sets the stage for the kind of voyage of discovery that is the nature of this approach to research in describing “the polarity of familiarity and strangeness [as the] true locus of hermeneutics” (p. 295). He activates this attitude with this charge, “The essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open” (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 299). As a result, the more that has been revealed the greater awareness there has been of what is hidden. Returning to my phenomenological question, I explore the insights of what has been exposed in this process.

In contrast to the Greek epic journey’s circling around to the hero’s triumphant return home, Jewish journeys tend to be linear. Odysseus’ voyage in *The Odyssey*, is an example of this cultural contrast:

Tell me all the men’s cities he (Odysseus) saw and the men’s minds, how often he suffered heartfelt pain on the broad sea, striving for life and a way back home for his war-friends. (Homer, 2004, p. 3)

In the *Torah* narrative Abraham leaves Ur, Jacob dies in Egypt, and Moses never returns to Egypt. In the spirit of Aristotle, who inspired Heidegger, I bring this journey home, returning to the question that launched this exploration: What is the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting? This query leads me to a journey revisiting my own spiritual path, my experiences as a teacher of sacred text, and my present position as a synagogue-school education director. I look at what I bring to this exploration, inspired by Gadamer (1960/1999) who says, “Understanding begins ... when something addresses us ... [and we carry out] the fundamental suspension of our own prejudices” (p. 299). Throughout my interpretive renderings, I seek to bring to light my pre-understandings that may interfere with my seeing, hearing, and experiencing anew, the narratives and insights my conversants enthusiastically share with me. Being aware of

my preunderstandings brings me to a stage where I can best get, “To the things themselves” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 50), that is, as close to the phenomenon as possible in an unencumbered way. Heidegger (1927/1962) articulates a fundamental principle of this approach as, “Thus phenomenology means to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (p. 58).

This investigation has been my own epic voyage carrying elements of Odysseus, Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. I have integrated the metaphor of venturing into nature as a thematic device throughout this text. A connection between nature and the *Torah* is evident in the first verse of that sacred text, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (*Bereshit* 1:1, Hertz). Whether the creation story is taken as literal truth or poetic allegory, setting, space, and place are essential elements of the Biblical narrative. In the wilderness, Moses stood “on holy ground” (*Shemot* 3:5). There are mysteries to nature that provoke curious interest, a desire to uncover that which is hidden, and inspire the sacred, spiritual sense. The first act of creation, “Light” (*Bereshit* 1:3) is conceivably the most pervasive metaphor for the pursuit of knowledge, as evidenced in the lamp of learning, the concept of being enlightened, or as Sherlock Holmes put it, “throw some little light upon the mystery” (Doyle, 1995, p. 187). I carry this metaphor into this closing chapter. This document is a testimony of the transformations undergone through the process of a journey, be it a phenomenological one, or an occupational one. This chapter represents the homecoming of my companions.

What A Long Strange Trip It's Been

Sometimes the light's all shinin' on me;
Other times, I can barely see,
Lately it occurs to me,
What a long, strange trip it's been. (Hunter, as cited in Dodd, 2005, pp. 131-133)

In so many dimensions what I learn from this investigation is the confluence of forces that come together in the classroom. Like outfitting an ambitious expedition, there are myriad details that must be attended to in order to ensure survival and success. The traveler's preparation for the journey, advance research, fitness training, and equipment selection are essential. There are external factors such as climate, terrain, and seasonal conditions that can test endurance and call for careful prior attention. An explorer sets out to expose himself or herself to the elements in order to make discoveries, bring back new understandings, and experience the world in new or unique ways. It is a synthesis of human and nature, predictably, unpredictably, and predictably unpredictably testing limits and breaching boundaries. The journey will hopefully be a transformative experience.

Hunter, in the verse above, reflects on the travels of his band, the attention called to them, changes going on around and within them, and the absurdity of it all. Heidegger (1927/1962) helps explain this understanding: "Dasein always knows its way about, even in a 'world' which is alien" (p. 407). This speaks to the internal compass that is the final arbitrator on what path to take through life.

As my conversants share their experiences they could all shake their heads in wonderment at "What a long strange trip it's been." They sometimes teach in classrooms that are too small for the number of students in their classes, other times in spaces vastly too large. On occasion the rooms are too hot, sometimes too cold. Most of them teach students who have already had a full day of secular school, or they get them on Sunday morning at an hour in which they are well aware of the fact that most of their friends are still in their pajamas. They teach a curriculum that befits a Conservative synagogue, a

movement that considers itself to be faithful to *halacha* (Jewish law). Meanwhile, they know that significant numbers of their students do not observe *kashrut* (Jewish dietary law) at any level; do not observe *Shabbat*, the day of rest, in any way consistent with what most rabbis would like to see their congregants practice; nor do they observe other *mitzvot* in any active, informed sense. Many of the students come home to parents who do not have the Jewish education they are experiencing and weaker Hebrew reading skills than they are developing. Similar to the song cited at the beginning of this section, teachers also stand in the spotlight, under the watch of students, parents and administrators. All eyes are on my conversants, expecting them to bring about the miracle of Jewish continuity. In light of the teaching, “The world stands on three things: on *Torah*, on the [Temple] service, and loving acts of kindness” (*Pirke Avot* 1:2), my conversants can either be hopeful that they have successfully inspired their students or despair that the world is in trouble.

An understanding of the condition in which Conservative Judaism finds itself, as my conversants tell it, calls for a careful consideration of the role of the synagogue-school within its home congregation, its mission, the responsibilities of the *klei kodesh* (synagogue spiritual leaders; rabbi and *hazzan*/cantor), the other members of the senior staff, lay leadership, and parents in the task of raising the next generation of Jews. A step beyond this is to look at the role of the denominational movement and the greater body beyond of world Jewry. For all of the dedication and effort of the synagogue-school teacher, there is an imbalance to be addressed between the work carried out in the classroom and the lifeworld of the student outside of that terrarium like environment.

Levin (1989) says:

Now, if we say that the infant's belongingness is our first moment binding, the moment when our hearing is bound to the matrix of sound and entwined ... with all other sonorous beings, then the next moment may also be termed a moment of binding, for it is the moment when our hearing is socialized into everydayness and bound to the ego's will ... for it is the moment when we bind our hearing to practices of self-formation—spiritual practices—that enable us to belong, once again, and yet also for the very first time, to the wholeness of Being. (pp. 211-212)

This is a call to mobilize a broad coalition to achieve the aims about which the study of sacred text is intended, Jewish living informed by making meaning of those texts and the history that unfolded in the succeeding centuries.

Diner (2004) reports that in mid-nineteenth century America, “Women made up the cadre of teachers who provided instruction in the Sunday schools They, more than the rabbis, came in contact with Jewish families and learned how American Jews articulated their Jewishness Ray Frank was one of these women She called on Jews to renew their commitment to Judaism and invoked in particular the power of women to give meaning to Jewish ritual” (p. 144). It is noteworthy that seven of my eight conversants are women. In only one of the four congregations in which this investigation is situated has there even been a female associate rabbi. The experiences that I bring forward from my conversants are little different from this description of American Jewry over a century ago. A perception of urgency is evident in what Diner (2004) goes on to say about Ray Frank, “A group of Jews in Chicago actually approached her in 1893 to serve as rabbi for their congregation, despite the fact that no woman had ever been a rabbi” (p. 144). The truth of Frank's message moved people to challenge a gender boundary that would not finally be crossed until late in the next century. Frank addressed an issue on which the rabbinic leadership was not speaking out. They thought they found

someone who could speak to a concern that aroused their passion to the extent that they were ready to establish a new paradigm, a woman rabbi, to advance that communal agenda. That so little has changed in over a century offers insight into the nature of Jewish communal leadership at the synagogue level and at broader layers of influence, its recognition of what teachers have to say about the state of the Jewish family, and general attentiveness to the experience of women.

Referring to the beginning of this section, and considering the record of the past century, my conversants, in addition to wondering at “what a long strange trip it’s been,” may also ask if anyone is listening to them. A fundamental liturgical statement of Jewish belief, the *Shema*, can be interpreted to say, “Listen Jewish people, *Adonai* is our God.” Following the logic of *B’Tzelem Elohim*, the idea that all people are created in the image of God, the Jewish people could consider it a *mitzvah* to listen closely to the insights their teachers have to offer. They are the embodiment of the Eternal and give voice to *divrei Torah*, words of Torah. As has been the case through the centuries, their message speaks to the present and the future.

Defining the American Jew

וְלֹא הַמִּדְרָשׁ הוּא הָעֵקֶר אֲלֵהּ הַמַּעֲשֶׂה (פרקי אבות יז)

Study [of the *Torah*] is not the main thing; [the] doing [of *Torah*] is. (*Pirke Avot* 1:17).

The words of the first century C.E. rabbi, Shimon ben Gamliel, quoted above, are as relevant today as they were 2,000 years ago. Every age has posed its own existential dilemma for Judaism. The destruction of the second Temple (70 CE) set in motion adaptations to the absence of the central cult and a rebalancing of the scales between the Jewish community of Babylon and that of Israel. The expulsion from Spain (1492) had a

similar effect with a new population center established in the Ottoman Empire and the first nascent steps into the “New World.” Waves of anti-Semitic pogroms provoked the massive emigration from Eastern Europe in the last decades of the 19th century that made America home to millions of Jews. In the aftermath of the Nazi Holocaust (1933-1945), Israel once again became a center of Jewish life. Each of these devastating blows to the heaviest concentrations of Jewish community led to a regrouping, rebalancing, and redefining of what it means to be a Jew that echoed through the Jewish world. Binding to the community, Being and belonging have been a part of the Jewish people’s journey through history, and it is the sacred texts that have been the lifeline of this community.

Teachers have been leading the children of Israel through the wilderness for over 3,000 years. They have brought the people to the banks of the river Jordan many times over. For Conservative American Jewry it may well be time to once again cross over those waters and constitute a newly defined community based on an historic past and future vision. Other “sonorous beings” need to partner with teachers, becoming part of this matrix. It can be said that at this point the supply line has become more tenuous than ever before and that an infusion of energy and multidimensional commitment of time and resources is uniquely critical. As it is, spiritual practices and traditions, in this handed down faith, are falling into a gap between generations.

In Chapter Four and in the previous section I referred to the disregard for observance of *kashrut* (dietary law), *Shabbat*, and *Pesah* (Passover), or other *mitzvot* with the understanding that they are rooted in sacred text, such as advocating for civil or human rights. To be sure, what it means to be Jewish can be broadly defined. To be a Conservative Jew within the setting of a synagogue spans a great range, including offense

taken at women wearing a *tallit* (prayer shawl) and reading from the Torah, to great loyalty to a female rabbi who engages in both of those practices, as well as others once reserved exclusively for males.

My conversants exemplify Jewish Being and give instruction within the context of Conservative congregations. Their work can be seen in the spirit of Sartre's words, "To be is to act, and to cease to act is to cease to be" (1943/1956, p. 452). At one level, their work defines their being, but even more meaningful to them is the recognition that should this generation of children cease to act Jewish, Judaism will cease to be. My conversants reveal an awareness that after centuries of despots and tyrants trying to obliterate the Jewish people, assimilation into the mainstream of American life is the more prescient concern. Sartre (1943/1956) articulates this concern as "nothingness haunts being" (p. 16).

While the teachers are the hub around which this investigation has taken place, it is the children who are the axis around which this world revolves. Professor Andrews stakes out a principle on employment security for educators, "Schools are not a jobs program for teachers" (personal communication, 1997). That is to say that administrators' and teachers' first responsibility is to the children.

Taking Responsibility

Responsibility pervades the existence of the synagogue-school teacher. They recognize a communal obligation toward children; they depend on that community to support their work, and they fulfill a personal duty. It is not a huge leap to propose a connection between Karl Marx, who was born Jewish, and Judaism's ancient sages. In contemplating the role of the individual in society, Marx (1848/2002) concludes that a

guiding ethic would be, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (p. 169). Among the many *Talmudic* statements about work, is the verse, “One may do much or one may do little; it is all one, provided he directs his heart to heaven” (*Berachot* 17a). Both speak of a responsibility to work toward fulfilling our best potential. Indeed, most of my conversants recognize that their “ability” to teach is what led them to the classroom. That commitment becomes the fulfillment of several degrees of responsibility. Levinas (1982/1985) writes of this connection as an ethical calling, “The tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility” (p. 97). He takes this statement further, leaving little room to evade accountability in saying, “This [responsibility] moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other [can not be ignored]” (Levinas, 1982/1985, p. 97). Like *mitzvot*, in Levinas’s eyes this connection is obligatory.

As I further consider the implications of what my conversants share, I ask, what is the community’s obligation to the children? What are those beyond the current inner circle of participants doing or not doing to fulfill those responsibilities? In turn, what can be expected of the children? My conversants imply that more adults in the Jewish community have to recognize that it is everyone’s responsibility to have a direct hand in the life of the school and in the lives of children. The path many of them took to the classroom speaks, in Levinas’s terms, of a “responsibility” for every adult to contemplate making the effort to find their way into a classroom. Once there, the charge is to be that adult ready to guide a group of children through an exploration of Judaism’s sacred texts, be they words of *Torah*, *tefillah*, or topics any number of steps removed from those primary sources. This involves some personal risk, a test of confidence, braving what

Buber (1923/1958) calls, “the unreliable, perilous world of relation” (p. 78). An obstacle I regularly encounter is people saying something along the lines of, “I have no teacher training.” While there is relevance to this, it is far from being an insurmountable impediment.

Let me play the part of Shaw’s (1921) serpent in the Garden of Eden and temptingly challenge, “You see things; and you say, ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were; and I say, ‘Why not?’” (p. 6). Why not find a way to play a part in the Jewish education of a generation of children when the times call for it, as they have for thousands of years? Palmer (1998) operates according to the premise, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). I hold few doubts about the integrity of most of the Jewish adults I encounter in synagogue life. They have chosen to be part of a community of values.

I have also seen individuals transformed from trading the mantle of caring parent to synagogue-school faculty member. For some, the change is a new respect for those who make teaching a part of their lives. In others, it is the encounter with the ultimate questions of what it means to be Jewish. Can a person teach *kashrut*, *Shabbat*, or *tefillah* without grappling with what that content means personally? They have already taken the first step on this journey by having joined the synagogue community. I have said in earlier passages that the sea of Jewish learning is vast. In the case of some to whom I would appeal, a challenging threshold is the depth or shallowness of their Jewish knowledge. Nonetheless, Jewish study is meant to be an exploration, a building process, and a life-long pursuit. Joining this project of Jewish education can serve as a catalyst for re-engaging in an education that may have been on hold since adolescence. In reality,

these individuals bring a lifetime of Jewish experience to the classroom, a valuable, unrecognized asset. It is toward this Jewish identity and the personal integrity of the individual who will recognize this “responsibility” to the Jewish “Other” that I propose recruiting as synagogue-school faculty members. My conversants are well representative of the synagogue-school teacher corps, speaking for colleagues who are ever ready to make a skilled practitioner of the novice ready to enter into their midst.

Keeping the Conversation Going

My conversants are, above all, a vanguard against their charges losing their Jewish identities, rising to a self defined mission to bring the words of *Torah* and *tefillah* to third through seventh graders so that Jewish life will continue for another generation. They are motivated by those with whom they studied, the messages they absorbed in their own exploration of Jewish sacred text, and the personal relevance and meaning they have made of those words. They combine the qualities of prophet, sage, and the Almighty, in the verses they have to convey, the ethical-moral message they promote, and the vision they bring to the project. Their task is to be guide, saboteur, agent provocateur, iconoclast, and keeper of the faith. They are set up to balance a set curriculum, work within the framework of preceding and succeeding grades, and demonstrate independence, spontaneity, and improvisational skill. What is it that sustains these teachers when the vast majority of the material they teach is given little attention after their students have left the classroom? Their lessons on *Shabbat* rituals, *Pesah* observance, or explorations of *Torah* and *tefillah* often see no life in the short term beyond the four walls of the classroom. For what are these teachers preparing their students? Is it a distant point in the future when they will be making decisions on how to

live their lives? Is it to sustain a cultural tradition that is dissolving like an arctic glacier under the global warmth of comfort, security, and status in America?

Sartre (1943/1956) offers the insight, “I reveal myself to myself in authenticity, and I raise others along with myself towards the authentic” (p. 222). This describes a Being who has taken an assertive role toward influencing others. The authenticity that anchors their pursuit is an impassioned connection to Judaism. Their commitments are genuine and authentic. Heidegger (1927/1962) also writes of “authentic Self—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way” (p. 167). This shows *Dasein* in terms of being in the grip of an attractive force, in this case, a unique calling and connection. A term Heidegger (1927/1962) uses for this is “concernful absorption ... in which the worldhood of those entities within-the-world with which it is concerned is ... lit up for it” (p. 102). The sacred text that is at the core of my conversants’ teaching is that attractive force, their concernful absorption and the light toward which they advance. I have been out in the American west and seen vast acreages that a year earlier had been scorched black by raging fires. Across the landscape were inches tall saplings, leading the regeneration of those forests. My conversants are the sun, the soil, and the water, nourishing the saplings in our synagogue community, compelled to feed as forces of nature unto themselves.

These teachers are charting a path through a challenging educational landscape. The traditional ways of mapping a route don’t apply as this is a unique educational paradigm, in a novel setting, at a crossroads in time. The secular school teacher of math, science, history, or English is not charged with raising a generation of mathematicians, scientists, historians, literary writers, or critics. They may hold out hope of inspiring an

appreciation for those pursuits, possibly setting an individual on the path toward a college major, or a profession in their specialized field. In contrast, the synagogue-school teacher is reasonably confident that her students will grow up to be Jewish. That teacher's operant question is, what will it mean to that child to be Jewish?

I offer this poem-blessing to my conversants and their colleagues:

Benedictio: May your trails be crooked, winding,
lonesome, dangerous, leading to the most amazing
views. May your mountains rise into and above the
clouds. May your rivers flow without end, meandering
through pastoral valleys tinkling with bells, past
temples and castles and poets' towers into a dark
primeval forest where tigers belch and monkeys howl,
through miasmal and mysterious swamps and down
into a desert of red rock, blue mesas, domes and
pinnacles and grottoes of endless stone, and down
again into a deep vast ancient unknown chasm where
bars of sunlight blaze on profiled cliffs, where deer
walk across the white sand beaches, where storms
come and go as lightning clangs upon the high crags,
where something strange and more beautiful and more
full of wonder than your deepest dreams waits for
you—beyond that next turning of the canyon walls.
So long. (Abbey, 1994, p. 110)

I see in these words a connection between my metaphor of the encounter with nature and the lived experience of the synagogue-school teacher of sacred text. Abbey's allusions echo essences of the classroom experience of my conversants. They speak with fondness when they relate that their encounter with students, from beginning of lesson to the end, from September to June, is filled with unexpected turns, long, attention grabbing passages, moments of insecurity, unease, isolation, and, in the end, an unexpected gift. As mountains, the experience of teaching is to take on a lofty challenge, to work toward towering aspirations. As rivers, the dialogue flows on ceaselessly, the sights and sounds along the way inspiring deeper thought, and arousing a sense of mystery. *Torah* itself can

be “a deep vast ancient unknown chasm” offering secret understandings of life and humanity. It is the hope of teachers that Abbey’s “deepest dreams ... beyond that next turning” come to fruition as the delight of future cadres of students come into their world.

One of the ultimate Jewish questions of our day is, “Why be Jewish?” The contemporary term “Jew by choice” usually refers to a convert to Judaism; however, that term began to take on new meaning in the last decade of the 20th century. Schulweis (1999) articulates a vision of all American Jews as “Jews by choice” (p. 280). He opens the discussion of converts with the interpretation of Abraham as a convert to monotheism and then points out the continuity of this theme in the Biblical narrative, like Ruth, who said, “Your people will be my people, and your God my God” (*Rut* [Ruth] 1:16). His observation is that contemporary circumstances call for both the recognition that modern Jews, with the options afforded by American society are, in effect, “Jews by choice” and that many need the same educational opportunities to make that choice as the non-Jew on the path toward joining this faith community (Schulweis, 1999, p. 281). Until the great wave of emancipation began with the Enlightenment and the extension to Jews in Europe and America the rights of citizenship, adversity, of one form or another, may be identified as an essential theme of Jewish history and a force for sustaining Jewish community. With the more viral forms of that threat removed, what is the centripetal force that keeps Jewish community together? Is there a primordial clinging to clan, culture, race, or community? Is there an intuitive sense, a feeling in the *kishkes* (guts), that recognizes a hidden treasure to this communal entity? Teachers have long evidenced a unique insight into Jewish tradition and a genius for connecting learners to that content of instruction. They have proven to be among the elite leadership of the Jewish

community, accepting a daunting challenge out of a sincere belief in the authenticity of their Jewish Being. They serve the cause Schulweis (1999) calls for, engagement in the millennia old conversation, “Why [is] Judaism ... so important?” and “How ... can [Judaism] enrich our lives and the life of the universe?” (pp. 281-282). In the upcoming pages I further explicate insights, pedagogic possibilities, and personal transformations this investigation has brought about in me.

Atzmaut, Atzmi, V’Etzem: Independence, My Bones, and Essence

Atzmaut translates into English as independence. The holidays celebrating the date Israel and the United States both came into being are similarly known as Independence Day. However, a contrast between the United States’ Declaration of Independence and that of Israel is that the former was a proclamation rejecting an unseen ruler’s right to sovereignty over the American colonies, while the latter was a stepping up to the world stage in a vacuum of governing authority announcing the “establishment of a Jewish state” (Mendes-Flohr & Reinharz, 1980, p. 478), in essence, an assertion of existence. This event is both the fulfillment of Herzl’s (1896/1946) Zionist vision outlined in *The Jewish State*, as well as that of a verse in an inspiring song of Jewish ghetto and partisan fighters during the nightmare of the Nazi Holocaust, *Zog Mit Keyn Mol* (Never Say):

Kumen vet nokh

The hour we all long for will surely appear—

Our steps will thunder with the words: We are here! (Glick, as cited in Kalich & Meister, 1985, p. 69)

The Hebrew term *Atzmaut* is built around the *shoresh* (root meaning) *etzem*, which relates to bones and essences. I use this relationship to revisit what strikes me as one of the essences of the work synagogue-school teachers carry out, independence.

Perhaps they step into a vacuum like those who on May 14, 1948, in Tel Aviv declared Israel's autonomous existence. Paradoxically, my conversants are also Tories for the unseen ruler, a name for God being "Ruler of the Universe." One side of these teachers is that they are following instincts they feel deep in their bones. The material they work from is that inner essence of Judaism, stripped of centuries of history, tradition, rabbinic response, and dispersion across the globe. They begin, so to speak, with a Judaism stripped to the bones, the primary source text. The independence these teachers declare is a source of the energy that enlivens their classroom practice.

My conversants all clearly understand what the Conservative movement stands for, vague as that definition may be in some regards. In a sense, where the resolution tends to be blurry they are bringing that image into focus with a perspective shaped by the place in which the exploration is happening. Conceptually, the operant principle becomes, if it takes place in a Conservative synagogue, it must be Conservative. My conversants are aware of the broad outlines of the curriculum they are expected to present, a heightened sense of responsibility for the position they assume serving their respective congregations, and a sense of mission beyond that defined by their institutions. While several of these teachers have discarded, abandoned, and ignored the textbooks that were carefully chosen as the basis of their programs, they give instruction that confers a nod to that vestige of formal teaching. The beauty in this pedagogy is that it allows a skilled, experienced, dedicated teacher the opportunity to be attuned to the needs and interests of the students, and allows the flexibility to emphasize dimensions of material that will be most meaningful to the class. There is a certain irony here in that although the *Torah* has been the foundation text for Jewish study for thousands of years

and literally means the “Teaching,” it has proven an elusive subject for educational planners bent on devising a set curriculum for its teaching. This is one of the hidden mysteries, elemental to the nature of this text of which my conversants have come to an intuitive understanding through the experience of teaching.

My conversants mirror the tradition of broad freedom to interpret, write between the lines, and highlight one passage over another. What is conveyed is that generally, there are few precise teaching objectives toward which my conversants teach, certainly not structured goals directed at preparation for an aptitude test such as the SAT or any other attempt at a so called “objective exam.” My conversants barely speak of core knowledge such as the names of the patriarchal families, or of the five books of Moses, or a timeline of the *Torah’s* narrative. I read this as recognition that the landscape of Jewish studies is so vast, and the data points that could be gathered are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Narrowing the focus to a limited objective is to leave out a remarkable amount of material that would be potentially more compelling to a unique group of students. This is likely the dynamic that entrusts a teacher like Joyce to decide what in her six-hour curriculum will make the cut down to a four-hour program.

Creating A Sanctuary In Time

It is my interpretation that these teachers create a classroom experience that is an island of Jewish life surrounded by the sea of an otherwise secular existence for their children. Dewey (1974) speaks to this in his essay, *My Pedagogic Creed*:

- I believe that
- education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.
- school must represent present life—life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the play-ground.

— education which does not occur through forms of life, forms that are worth living for their own sake, is always a poor substitute for the genuine reality and tends to cramp and to deaden. (p. 430)

Engagement in the study of sacred text is Jewish living, as is participating in the community of learners that is the class, school, and congregation. It is tied to the calendar, the progression through the holidays, and the life cycle. The teachings immediately speak to the questions encountered by engagement with the outside world. My conversants are crafting Jewish experiences and associations that will be long lasting in influence. They instill an understanding for traditions and rituals that, if it is not already the case, the children may potentially begin to observe on their own later in life. Above all, they expose their students to the experience of the study of sacred text and the multiple meanings that can be taken from that body of literature. They make those texts accessible.

The making of Hebrew prayer meaningful is a common goal. Even if they have not achieved universal fluent reading skill or even an appreciation for the words, by their example and the classroom process, teachers and classmates recognize how those ancient chants reach a deep spiritual core. The “concernful absorption” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 102) is an engagement with Jewish sacred text, finding pleasure in coming to the synagogue, and establishing relations with people with whom their connections are as simple as the label “classmates,” and as complicated as being linked through an ancient, common ancestry. Abram (1996) writes:

Each place has its own dynamism, its own patterns of movement, and these patterns engage the senses and relate them in particular ways, instilling particular moods and modes of awareness, so that unlettered, oral people will rightly say that each place has its own mind, its own personality, its own intelligence. (p. 182)

Abram would recognize that entering the sacred space of the synagogue will, by definition, release forces that will have an influence on the relations taking place between teacher and student. The setting in which this educational modality takes place has significance beyond the content of instruction. The parent of a child in the class of one of my conversants reveals this understanding in her comment, “My goal is to get my children in this building as many days a week as possible.”

My conversants follow a course that previous generations of Jewish educators have explored. Overwhelmingly they have chosen a direction based on what they find personally meaningful, what brings them to where they are spiritually, and they advance that agenda. Like Steven, they can present an example of how “I have chosen to live my life, how others have chosen to live theirs.” Is this what will lead to a vital Jewish community when the 21st century turns into the 22nd century? Will we have “Jewish grandchildren,” as some have phrased this question? Synagogue-schools pursue an educational agenda that is at odds with the secular schools’ program of studies. The latter’s curriculum is directed toward the question, what do you want to be ten years from now? The implication is, what profession do you want to pursue? The former is more concerned with the question, what kind of person do you want to be ten years from now? This metamorphic process is like bringing together the temperature of *Torah* ethics and values and the pressure of middle class, suburban, 21st century America.

Negotiating the In-Between

Throughout this inquiry teachers have been “in-between” forces, some conflicting, others harmonious, and others working toward an amity of those polarities. This *in-between* has taken various forms including: relationship, interaction, balance,

confrontation, and obstruction. It is a zone fronted by calendar dates, Biblical figures, and social forces such as contrasting values, engagement-disengagement, assimilation-ethnic identity, ethnicity-religion, and superficiality-depth. Even the institution they work in, synagogue-school, is a synthesis of offsetting, unsettled agendas. For good measure, within the Conservative movement there is a built in tension, “Tradition and Change” (Waxman, 1958).

Gadamer (1960/1999) relates the idea of “in-between” to the process of “play” (p. 109). This may well explain the playful nature of my conversants, the in-betweens they project such as come-what-may-exploration to precise goal-focused behavior. The “in-between” they experience is less a discomforting trap, than a delightful game. Like with any challenging contest, a creative, imaginative, resourceful player is rewarded with success. This “in-between” as play also reminds me of how my father, when teaching me many years ago how to fix mechanical equipment, used “play,” to describe parts being loose or tight, and the situation specific need for one or the other. Tight is good for handlebars, but not necessarily for chains, for example. A tightly structured lesson can progress at a comforting pace, but keeping control a little loose makes room for creative spontaneity.

From my position as principal, I am attuned to this phenomenon of *in-betweenness*. Teachers are in a unique position, occupying vital junctions. It may well be a defining feature of a teacher’s understanding of the dynamics of their experience, an influence on their successes, failures, satisfactions, and frustrations. It points up the potential they hold for witnessing, influencing, or affecting students or community. It also reminds me of the degree of play to which my conversants have grown accustomed

to being granted. Buber (1965) recognizes this freedom: “Real education is made possible ... by the realization that youthful spontaneity must not be suppressed but must be allowed to give what it can” (p. 88). An ambiguity can be read into this: Whose youthful spontaneity—the teacher’s or the student’s? “In-betweenness” is revealed in my conversants’ satisfaction, dedication, and longevity. Being in-between powerful forces, connecting the sacred with the profane, advancing high minded ideals, working at the nexus of past-present-future, and being a player in the greatest game—human history—is a source of youthful vigor, like drinking from a veritable fountain of youth. The independent workspace these teachers create, the frontiers they expand, invite the possibility that their experience becomes the field report either treated as an irregular anomaly, an irreconcilable dilemma, a situation that will straighten itself out, or an awesome challenge waiting for an advocate ready to commit the time, energy, and prestige to setting and advancing a progressive community agenda. In this upcoming section, I explore implications of what these teachers are saying.

Listen to Her Voice: A *Drash* on Teachers

שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ (בראשית כא:יב)

Listen to her voice. (*Bereshit*: 21:12)

While all of these teachers bring to their task exceptional talents and abilities that make them an asset to their schools, they experience a significant level of frustration and reveal vast unfulfilled potential in this educational environment. The pedagogic resources to convey the material to which my conversants are so passionately devoted, and to generate the student echo of application and understanding, are terrains that still are significantly uncultivated. Terry and the others have classes, or at least moments, that

push beyond the limits of their abilities to keep a group of children engaged in the material they are presenting. The uniqueness of the setting calls for a dexterity that is either more nuanced than that of a public school teacher or simply, vastly different.

Lily expresses an emptiness that she has managed to teach her children anything: “I am continually left wondering if they’re just having fun, which is good, or if they’re getting something more.” I understand her comment to give voice to an absence. Hers is a “voice” to be heard. A dilemma she poses is: Should this circumstance be allowed to continue? Would something of value be sacrificed in the effort to create a mechanism for assessing whether or not children are getting something more out of the experience of synagogue-school than “just having fun.” The potential in leaving Lily, and others like her, in this state of uncertainty, may ultimately have a corrosive effect on the teacher corps, a product of the question, Is my work making a difference?” Should teachers consistently answer that to the negative, or give in to the self-doubt Lily reveals? This could be a condition that will negatively resonate through the Jewish community of the present and the future. Sartre (1943/1956) writes, “Freedom, which manifests itself through anguish, is characterized by constantly renewed obligation to remake the *Self* which designates the free being” (pp. 34-35). This anguish calls for a remaking of the Self we call synagogue-school teaching and challenges us to find a means of gaining a glimpse of the students’ reflections on the synagogue-school experience.

It is one thing when a teacher comes to me with a problem, an issue, an idea, or a suggestion. Teachers will make a case for change of one kind or another, leave it in my hands, and check back in on the progress of their proposal. Sometimes it is for something ordinary that will make them individually more effective in the classroom. On occasion it

is for something of weightier significance, but still limited to their situation. In many cases it is for a bigger change, something to do with their grade level, or the way the school is organized. Teachers also exchange ideas casually, standing around the copier machine, in the hallway before and after class, and in more formal staff meetings. Deeply rooted in Jewish ethics is the personal responsibility *L'taken Olam*, literally, “to fix the world.” With this in mind, the proposal to make the school better in some way, comes from a religious obligation, and often from a passionate, caring aspect of Being.

I invited my conversants to share the narratives of their experiences of teaching sacred text. The obligation I invited of myself is *kavod*, meaning honor or respect, and in this context implies that their stories are to be explored for pedagogic possibility, the potential for bringing about *Tikkun Olam*, the repair of the world. In this section I endeavor toward seeing that there is a “listen[ing] to ... [the] voice” of my conversants and that the sacred text of their experiences is given *kavod*, explored for the lessons embedded within. This is a *drash*, an exploration of the pedagogic question: What can be learned from this?

Reaching Toward an Understanding of the Synagogue-School Teacher

My conversants’ voices lead me to an overlook facing a landscape rich in possibilities. A pathway I propose exploring is an energetic appraisal, dedication of energy and resources to re-define what it means to be a synagogue-school teacher. Teachers are engaged in a unique educational endeavor, a vital component of Jewish life in America, a project that has institutional weaknesses and abundant strengths, and successes on which a vibrant future can be built.

These experienced educators have an affinity for working with the raw material of instruction and making it meaningful. In some classes there is dramatic play to bring material to life. On occasion, art materials make for active involvement. Still, the prime modality for engagement, overwhelmingly, is discussion. A child who learns best through other teaching methods is, to a degree, disenfranchised from the class process. Drama and art are employed infrequently; creative writing is even rarer, and music typically is Balkanized into the domain of a music specialist. What are some possibilities for preparing teachers for the journey from “Good morning” to “Good bye,” making it a more delightful, more satisfying exploration of the sacred.

My conversants had much to share about their experiences of teaching the sacred and appreciated the encouragement to think deeply about their work. It would appear that there is a need for the facilitation of teacher forums examining contemporary understandings of curriculum and instruction. In-service seminars with titles such as “Connecting or Re-connecting with your Inner Iconoclast” or “Teaching a Pre-Guttenberg Book to the iPod, iPhone, My Space Generation,” might be aimed at bringing teachers together for dialogue and discussion with progressive, innovative educators on what it means to be a synagogue-school teacher. A systematic examination of innovative pedagogies such as experiential (narrative reflections on personal experience), active, or cooperative learning; alternative assessment; and a focus on student engagement would help teachers develop an understanding that synagogue-schools are unique educational settings. These pedagogical possibilities are all directed toward the potential for broadening the paradigms used to draw in students. These suggestions might free up practitioners to continue the independence, spontaneity, and creativity they bring to their

teaching while in dialogue with teachers in training, novice teachers, colleagues, administration, and other stakeholders and participants. Great things are happening in the schools in which my conversants teach. Students are engaged, enthused, and active in the process of making sacred text personally meaningful, but there is room for enhancement.

Re-Vision and Re-Definition

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאוֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה (בראשית א:ה)

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. (*Bereshit* 1:5)

It is fair to say that names have been significant since time immemorial. In the *Torah's* narrative, at first God named the objects created. God later promises Abraham, "I will bless you and make your name great" (*Bereshit* 12:2). This adds in the notion that a name signifies more than being just a label, but that there are values and associations that come along with that marker. An Eastern European Jewish tradition is to rename a sick person to protect him or her from the Angel of Death, as if the malevolent spirit was working from a list of names to track down. This protective act can deflect the unwanted outcome in the belief that the name has a part in attracting its own demise. Calling the setting in which this investigation takes place "synagogue-school" leads me to contemplate the potential in changing the name for this enterprise. Synagogue-school, Hebrew school or religious school, all with the appendage school, brings up images that are not necessarily helpful to the purpose or the potential to which this collection of individuals is capable. In Chapter Four, I referred to my conversants' use of Hebrew or Yiddish terms when English could not begin to adequately convey the thoughts they wanted to communicate. I also referred in Chapter One, to the ancient institution of the *Beit Midrash*, the House of Learning. What is the potential in renaming this project,

casting off the old, inescapable images and expectations that are conjured up by “school,” and conceive of a new institution altogether, liberated of both the best and the worst associations of its past? A variant of *Beit Midrash*, *midrasha*, could be a viable generic alternative to identify these reconceived institutions. The term is currently in wide use, generally for programs of Jewish learning for teenagers. Another possible identification could be *machon*, meaning institute. It is a term common in Israel for post elementary educational institutions, a factor that can help feed an agenda for building connection to that country, a common goal for synagogue-schools. A name change could signal an intention to break with the past and might provide the stimulus to forge a new identity.

My conversants are thoughtful practitioners of a specialized craft, potentially an alternative paradigm to the way education is conceived in America. On the occasion that five of them engage in *logos*, there is an instant community among those individuals who represent the faculties of four different schools, that is to say, professionals who evidence little need to find a comfort zone before sharing openly and collegially. Among the benefits of facilitating this level of engagement will be a sense of unity and cohesion that are insufficiently developed among synagogue-school teaching staffs and the potential for the flourishing of their creative capacities.

Synagogue-school education cannot, nor should it, aspire to the structure of formal education as is practiced in our local school system and most of the area private schools. In the Greater Washington community, the local central agency for Jewish education has advanced an agenda for breaching the boundary between formal and informal education. The discussion is somewhat moot as long as this unique educational endeavor virtually is playing on a dimensional plane that barely intersects either of these

polarities. A different question is called for. The dialogic process I encourage would lead to teachers challenging the validity of practice that has little or no place in a synagogue-school and resolve for themselves what is appropriate pedagogy.

A challenge is that many parents have a problem of dealing with the dissonance between the synagogue-school they recall from their long past childhoods and their children's experience today. Another difficulty is that parents and children are in a fog on resolving the disconnect between schooling as it is promulgated in the synagogue-school, and education as it is carried out in the secular schools. While there are times that there is a call for the synagogue-school to adopt the formality and rigidity of the secular school, the vast majority of parents and children are demonstrably unwilling and unprepared to devote the time and energy to such a pursuit, were it even appropriate. "When do you feel the presence of God," is not a question that lends itself well to a multiple choice answer that would be checked by an electronic scanner. In this regard an element of the genius of the synagogue school teacher is the recognition of these realities and the finessing of a pedagogy that works toward a more nuanced agenda. The seeds of this landscape's flourishing are already sprouting like desert regions planted by Israel's early 20th century *halutzim* (pioneers). It is time for a new generation of planters, more refined, better supported, particularly skilled, and a network better sustaining their work.

Creating A Partnership: A *Drash* on Parents

The hours most synagogue-school students spend with my conversants is overwhelmingly the defining Jewish experience in their weekly cycle of secular school, extra-curricular activities, and home life. These teachers make that face to face encounter memorable, sometimes even transformative. The engagement with sacred text is the

bedrock of that encounter. The parent who asks, “Can you give my child some *Yiddishkeit*?” fails to or wrongly defines what *Yiddishkeit* is in the 21st century. The *Yiddishkeit* Rachel and her fellow conversants provide, resides in the creation of a pre-adolescent Jewish community, gathering for two to three hours one to three times a week to engage in Jewish study. The *Yiddishkeit* of *Shabbat* candles, abstaining from eating bread during the week of *Pesah*, and *davening* (praying) three times a day is not the teacher’s responsibility. A role of theirs is to lay at the feet of parents the challenge to follow through on what has been addressed in the classroom.

To a great extent parents are an invisible, un-raised hand, barely engaged in the process of their children’s Jewish upbringing. The praise they bestow for the teacher who “makes it fun” is mostly a measure of the degree to which their child is ready to get in the car to go to “Hebrew School” without much of a fuss. Parents who take their child to violin lessons would encourage their budding prodigy to practice on a regular basis. Parents who sign their child up for recreation league baseball, football or basketball would be likely to play catch, throw passes, take shots at a backboard and rim mounted above the garage door, or take their child to a collegiate or professional game from time to time. The corollaries to learning Hebrew or putting into practice material explored in the classroom is at a very low level and, for all too many children, almost non-existent. Perhaps it is ironic that one of the more typical experiences I have when sending a letter to parents with an RSVP date is that the responses usually come in late, very late, or not at all. Regarding their children’s Jewish education, parents are invited to the outing, but are hard pressed to even reply.

One direction in which synagogue-school education can turn is to call on parents to bring *Yiddishkeit*, Jewish living, however they define it, increasingly into their lives. This will require a broad based coalition of synagogue and movement leadership tenaciously and imaginatively dedicated to this goal. There will be a need to create easily accessible material resources that can take parents, step-by-step through the rituals and practices of Jewish living. It will require the commitment of financial resources to funding a staff position to facilitate this process. As a template I would use the school curriculum. It is already, essentially, a mission statement of what the respective congregations have agreed on as to what they want the Jewish people to look like several decades in the near and distant future.

Say Your Prayers

One area in which to further develop the relation between the school and the family is with the *Tefillah*-Hebrew component of the curriculum. Drawing parents into a parallel exploration of this material is a natural focus. Outside of attending *Rosh HaShanna* and *Yom Kippur* services, parents tend to go on hiatus from synagogue services until there is an obligation, such as a *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*, that they are compelled to attend. All of my conversants refer to their students' requirements to attend *Shabbat* services. There is consensus among synagogue leaders that parents are expected to at least drive the car up to the synagogue door. The next step is to park the car, come into the building, and take a seat among fellow congregants. To facilitate this, it will be necessary to equip parents to come into the sanctuary and participate in the service.

Block (2001) calls attention to a significant obstacle, "In prayer and in study, we acknowledge how little we know" (p. 23). Who in a congregation of highly successful

individuals wants to acknowledge their lack of knowledge? Block (2001) also speaks of another challenge, “Study is a responsibility to heal the community because it is in study that we learn how to act in the world” (p. 27). This is to say that once an adult has begun this learning process whole new worlds of obligation and behavior are entered.

Nonetheless, to accept the status quo is to perpetuate a situation where students are devoting significant time to learning Hebrew prayers, but have few adults in their lives for whom that skill is meaningfully put to use as a part of personal spirituality and a guide to behavior. Instead, this becomes a skill set to be called on when compelled to be in synagogue for a *simcha* (a celebratory event). This is a sure course for hypocrisy and cynicism toward the work of the synagogue-school teacher. It is more aligned with children perceiving their lessons as basic survival skills for enduring inhospitable conditions. At its core, this is a matter of defining or re-defining Conservative Judaism synagogue by synagogue or movement wide. It is a circumstance that calls for attention and the consideration of an action plan. Even if resolved in degrees of ambiguity, it would represent the recognition of an inconsistency between parent behavior and the actions toward which their children are given instruction and an inclination toward negotiating that gap.

The synagogue-school experience is meaningful in its own right. However, the future toward which it is directed is not likely to come to fruition for this generation of students unless there is a more significant interplay between the Jewish studies of the curriculum and the Jewish life of the child after he/she has left the synagogue. This is an opportunity for parents to take a decisive role in shaping the Jewish future. The school can encourage them to enter the partnership.

Time To Celebrate

Holidays are a standby in the synagogue-school curriculum. My conversants provoke an engaging exploration of the “sacred occasions” described in the *Torah*; the holidays that have their roots in later sacred texts, particularly *Hanukkah* and *Purim*; and the more contemporary observances, such as *Yom HaShoah* (Holocaust Remembrance Day) and *Yom HaAtzmaut* (Israel Independence Day). The children are more than ready to bring enthusiasm and energy to these moments of unique Jewish connection and they do so, within the context of the synagogue-school.

Parents have the opportunity to play a significant role in making the Jewish celebrations and observances a part of their families’ lives. It would be a challenge to find more than a handful of the children of these teachers who are not acutely aware of traditions and rituals associated with Halloween, Valentine’s Day, or April Fool’s Day. This circumstance is open to much interpretation. It could be the draw of popular culture, the power of mass marketing, and even the meanings associated with these days. Nonetheless, the circumstances give rise to a dilemma to which parents and teachers can collaboratively respond. The dialogue can begin with the question, “Can a Jew celebrate these occasions with a clear conscience?” There is a practical challenge, “How are the rocky shoals of the secular calendar to be negotiated?” Perhaps the ultimate challenge is, “What is the path to similar literacy (as there is for Halloween, Valentine’s Day, and April Fools Day) for the special days on the Jewish calendar?”

One course is for parents to discover or re-discover the Jewish holidays with their families and embrace a higher level of engagement with both the “sacred occasions” and the dates less divinely ordained, but important, nonetheless. Heschel (1951) writes, “We

must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is the moment that lends significance to things” (p. 6). Children are hungry for moments of being part of something bigger than themselves. For now, parents all too often squander these precious opportunities, missing out on the special connection that is forged in the classroom. My conversants delight in telling their students that as they are sitting down to the *Pesah seder*, or lighting the *Hanukkah* candles, they are connecting with Jews who have been observing the same rituals since ancient times, and with Jews around the world who are doing the same thing at that moment or at least on that day. Among the Jewish popular cultural icons referenced in Adam Sandler’s (1996, track 6), “The *Chanukah* Song” are:

David Lee Roth lights the *menorah*,
So do James Caan, Kirk Douglas and the late Diana Shore-ah.

The song may have been born in one of those synagogue-school lessons. Its popularity is a reflection of the power of connection. Sandler’s tune maintains its resonance since its debut in 1995 with updating of the *Hanukkah* celebrants, a later version including Ben Stiller, Jack Black, Paula Abdul, and Natalie Portman. Still, the idea of sharing a moment with these television and movie stars is the experience of elevated significance. Alas and alack, they are moments that could be shared by many more children. This has been a neglected region of the synagogue landscape.

There is a balance to be struck between the communal and private aspects of celebrating holidays. In addition, there are vast degrees of difference by which holidays are observed. This is a call for synagogue leadership to establish mechanisms for facilitating families breaching the barriers of bringing to expression the celebration of Jewish holidays both in the home and as a community. The influence this will have on the experience of the synagogue-school teachers, the climate of classes, and the Jewish

future has the potential to be enormous. A classroom where the relevance of engaging in this material is more than academic could bring about a more energized discourse and an appreciation for the relevance of the subject. This has the potential to revitalize the practice of passing on traditions and rituals from generation to generation, the self-sustaining cycle that supported Jewish continuity through the centuries. It is this social-cultural dynamic that has surrendered to the influence of the American experience, and for many individuals brought about an assimilated, unaffiliated Jewish identity that can only be distinguished by a last name, a look at a family tree, or an interest in family history.

A message to be gleaned from the *logos* with my conversants is the potential influence parents might have on raising their level of commitment to the principles of the Jewish community with which they affiliate, in the case of this investigation, Conservative synagogues. Continuing to do otherwise communicates either a conflicting signal, or at least one that can be interpreted as, “I think this is important, I would like to do it, but somehow, this is a threshold I have not yet figured out how to cross.” This, too, could serve as the program for engaging parents in the life of the synagogue community.

Engaging in Torah Study

הלל אומר: הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן. אוהב שלום ורודף שלום.
אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה. (פרקי אבות איב)

Hillel said: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and bringing them close to the Torah. (*Pirke Avot* 1:12)

Among all possibilities for bringing profound change in the life of the classroom, bringing parents into the discussion of *Torah*, a most engaging, approachable, and multifaceted text, holds vast potential. In the hands of a skilled teacher, it is accessible by

people at all levels of Jewish knowledge, from scholars to those who have never read a translated verse of the text. The only drawback might be a lack of interest. Returning to the text, year after year, is like revisiting a favorite work of art, a much loved poem, or a long appreciated piece of music. The material is unchanged; it is the viewer, the reader, the listener who are not the same. Text study can be the grounds for bringing together people with a wide array of grounding interests, from politics to humanitarian causes, from ethics to matters of religious practice, and far more. This is a message to be communicated widely throughout the synagogue community, with communal energy and resources directed toward facilitating its flourishing.

Sartre (1943/1956) writes, “The Other is free ... the Other’s freedom is revealed to me across the un-easy indetermination of the being which I am for him” (p. 238). The *Torah* speaks most strongly of the balance between individual freedom and communal responsibility. The story of the Exodus is one of evolution from slavery, to boundless freedom, to freedom within limits. Engagement with the *Torah* would embody the dialogue determining the freedom of the Other to act as an independent player, or as an actor in relationship with individuals and a community; this is in answer to the unresolved “being which I am for him.”

A result of energized attention toward this most fundamental element of Judaism would best represent a rebuilding from the foundation, a return to the bedrock of Judaism, just as modern Israel’s *halutzim* sought to create a new kind of Jew. A parent cohort united by the common language of *Torah* will be energized in unique ways, by both the *Torah* as instruction and rules, and by that document as an inspiration for provocative thought about what it means to be a Jew, how to live a more fully actualized Jewish life,

and how to relate to an uncertain world . Buber (1923/1956) writes, “The word of address and the word of response live in one language, *I* and *Thou* take their stand not merely in relation, but also in the solid give and take of talk” (p. 103). The discourse alone, in adult study groups and carried into the home, will likely have a ripple effect through these communities, creating relationships and linking individuals and families through the shared experience of *Torah* study. This would also serve as creating a language through which to relate to the world, in all its dimensions.

A teaching attributed to the first century rabbi, Shammai, says, “Make your *Torah* [study] a habit” (*Pirke Avot* 1:15). A primary concern for Fackenheim (1987), and for me, is *amcha*, “the ordinary Jewish folk who may not be learned or saintly but are far from frivolous, unintelligent, unwilling to learn and—most important of all—thoughtless” (p. 15). He also points out the egalitarian streak in Judaism that upholds the value that every Jew is responsible for hearing the *Torah* read in its entirety every year. He says that to engage in this process, to develop a dialectical relationship with the *Torah*, and asking the troubling questions of faith, will be one of strengthening Judaism. This is a value to be re-asserted in our times.

The three curriculum areas of *Tefillah*-Hebrew, Holidays, and *Torah*, are common to all of the schools I visited. From school to school there is an emphasis, in varying degrees, on other topics. Some put a higher priority on Jewish history, others on Israel, and others on special topics such as the Jewish life cycle or comparative Judaism. The bottom line question on this may be, at the end of the day should the children be more knowledgeable than their parents on these subjects, or the only ones in the house who have those understandings? What is the significance when the “doing of *Torah*” does or

does not continue between class sessions in synagogue-school? To make a contrast with secular education, parents already learned what they needed to graduate high school, go on to university, and perhaps continue on to an advanced degree, in essence, to prepare for the occupation in which they engage. Jewish education, on the other hand, is meant to be a lifelong process.

Being Jewish is, or at least can, define who a person is. The *-ish* suffix reminds us, though, that this definition is imprecise, like 10 o'clockish is not exactly at the top of the hour. The Jewishness that defines me is at variance with that of my conversants, colleagues, and fellow congregants, as is the diversity between each of those individuals. Some are more energized by regular prayer, others by celebrations, still others by *Torah* study, and others are still searching for the spark that will ignite a passion for some aspect of this ancient tradition. Judaism is a religion of deed over creed, *mitzvah*-action over belief. At a surface level, adults make an unambiguous value statement to their children by choosing to affiliate with a synagogue and accommodating to the inconvenience and stress of getting their children to the synagogue-school. My conversants convey an experience of shared purpose to what goes on in the classroom. They also experience a disharmony between the intellectual, academic engagement in the school and the performance of those practices in the home as reported by their students. Creating opportunities for setting these polarities in rhythm holds potential for creating a richer, more supportive context for their interaction with students.

Rediscovering the Spiritualizing Meta-Halacha

A grievous failure of nerve affects Conservative Judaism. (Schorsch, Jewish Theological Seminary Commencement Address, 2006)

In his 2006 commencement address to the Conservative movement's flagship academic institution, Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), outgoing Chancellor, Ismar Schorsch, made the above comment while speaking of something missing from Conservative Judaism. He went on to label that missing element, a "spiritualizing meta-*halacha*" or simply "religious meaning [or something] substantially spiritual." He lamented, "The malaise of Conservative Judaism ... [is that] we have lost confidence in the viability of the distinctive polarity that once resonated within [and called for] a vigorous reaffirmation of the old which gloriously captures our essence."

The challenges Schorsch poses for Conservative Judaism's leadership allow for many alternatives. The movement can continue to blithely disregard its current state of decay from within or recognize that it is not what it imagines itself to be, and set about to alter that reality. A status quo response might be to declare that the movement is what it is and call that good enough. Another possibility is to conceive of a direction, consciously evolve into a new form, and seek re-definition. Each of these options calls for a vastly different strategy, decisive leadership, and recognition that we are at a turning point in history. Sartre (1943/1956) writes, "Being is without reason, without cause, and without necessity" (p. 537). It is up to individuals to shape Being, or circumstances will inevitably run their natural course. The once significant spiritual home to the majority of synagogue affiliated American Jews could potentially become a chapter in a history book.

Central to this change process would be visioning the potential in this enterprise and energizing the effort toward fulfilling that conception. Palmer (1998) speaks of making a movement for educational reform, qualifying his stages by saying they

“overlap, circle back, and sometimes play leapfrog with each other” (p. 166). This process begins when “Individuals come to a recognition ‘where they must choose between allowing selfhood to die or claiming (their personal or communal) identity and integrity’” (Palmer, 1998, p. 167). This echoes Schorsch’s comments, challenging Conservative Jewish leadership to recommit to the principles that for decades defined the movement.

Parker envisions change advancing when “Communities of Congruence” (1998, p. 172) come together to create a climate for reform. There is a point when the initiative must be exposed to a broader audience, opened up to scrutiny, challenge, refinement, and the possibility of drawing in further support. Blogs, newspaper articles, and letters to the editor following the 2006 JTS commencement speech, certainly represented this phase in the process, running the gamut from denouncing to embracing the sentiments expressed. This movement approach to reform, when organized and energized, can be a vehicle for bringing about change. Palmer proposes that the “system of rewards around the activities those people value” (p. 180) is key to bringing about such change. A Conservative movement energized spiritually and in practice would be a valued reward. With this I see potential in changing the logic by which Conservative synagogues are engineered. Old trails would have to be cleared and new pathways forged into, out of, and through this sacred landscape. Greene says that, “To be in touch with our landscapes is to be conscious of our evolving experiences, to be aware of the ways in which we encounter our world” (1978, p. 2). This speaks of re-connecting to the Conservative movement *shel ma’alah v’shel matah*, that is, the idealized vision and the reality. It is to rediscover what it once stood for and what it can mean to be a Conservative Jew. In spiritual terms this is

heshbon hanefesh, an accounting of the soul. It invites the question, has the Conservative movement lost its soul?

The *Torah*, and the wisdom literature inspired by it, carry the seeds of the Conservative movement's renaissance. Prohibitions on inaction, "Don't stand idly by" (*Torah*, *Vayikra* 19:16) and "Yours is not to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it" (*Pirke Avot* 2:21), assign responsibility to synagogue leadership in this area. This direction would entail confronting an existential threat to Conservative Judaism, the movement occupying the center path of synagogue affiliated American Jewry, as it is currently defined. It could be seen as irresponsible to violate either of these principles, a *shanda* (a shame, a scandal), my Yiddish speaking grandparents would have said.

Heidegger (1967/1998) writes:

The phrase required now—to let beings be—does not refer to neglect and indifference but rather the opposite. To let be is to engage oneself with beings. On the other hand, to be sure, this is not to be understood only as mere management, preservation, tending and planning of the beings in each case encountered or sought out. To let be—that is, to let beings be the beings that they are—means to engage oneself with the open region and its openness into which every being comes to stand, bringing that openness, as it were, along with itself. (p. 144)

An operant term here is "engage." All too many parents cannot find their entry point to undertake the Jewish journey. The language my conversants speak, and in which their children are gaining fluency, is in many ways a foreign tongue to their parents. The distant land may be the *Shomer Shabbos* (Shabbat observant) neighborhood in walking distance of a synagogue, or just that of the Jewishly literate. This to invite parents who are synagogue members in good standing to be good members standing in synagogue, in the open, engaged in the life of that community.

Which Way To Go

It is with all due respect for my friends and colleagues who identify themselves as traditionally observant (Orthodox) or Reform Jews, that I make this claim: if the Conservative movement would cease to exist, the result would not likely benefit either of those movements. Assuming families seeking a Hebrew heavy service, a full reading of the *Parshat HaShavuah* (weekly Torah portion), and a traditional *D'var Torah* (Torah talk) in an environment they would consider to be “authentically Jewish,” joined an Orthodox congregation, they would represent a corrosive strain on those communities as they would likely continue to be non-observant in their personal practices, and thus out of sync with their new spiritual homes. Furthermore, their children, likely would experience a sense of alienation brought on by the more traditionally oriented educational programs of their schools. An alternative direction would be that these families would turn to Reform congregations in which many fewer hours are devoted to the study of sacred text, and the expectations to express Jewish identity through *mitzvot* are significantly less and skewed toward a different selection of commandments. While this may be more in keeping with their practice, it may not be in line with their aspirations and could prove unsatisfying spiritually.

Another possibility is that some may experiment, go “shul shopping,” and find a home in a Reconstructionist congregation or a Renewal community. As is already happening, another scenario would have the vast majority drifting away from congregational life altogether. These possibilities put the onus on the leadership of the Conservative movement to get energized on what amounts to the defining issue of the day. I speak as one on a lifelong spiritual quest, a person who celebrated *Bar Mitzvah* in

an Orthodox *shul*, directed the religious school in Reform temples for six years, and have been part of the Conservative movement for almost two decades. It is with much love and appreciation for what the spectrum of Jewish practice has meant to me, an open gateway across thresholds, that I refer to those movements.

Where Do We Go From Here

At its core, the problem is one that has been debated in Jewish communities since at least the first centuries of the Common Era, the relationship between personal practice and Jewish study. My conversants speak poignantly of an imbalance between those forces. Their experience is of the offspring of a generation that has not been raised to make a part of personal practice the *mitzvot* (commandments) that would be learned through engaging in the study of sacred text. Often, the teacher is the sole individual in the classroom who is observing the traditions and rituals of Jewish life in a substantial, intellectually, and emotionally engaging way. This may serve to perpetuate the same shallow understanding of Judaism these parents experience, with the most intense, meaningful engagement with Jewish life for the children being the few hours a week they spend in the synagogue-school. This educational experience is a terrific start, a far better one than most of these parents, and previous generations, had. The children in this Greater Washington community are fortunate in the learning experience they are receiving. It is a large Jewish community with a particularly effective central education agency, an active network of synagogue-school professionals, good teacher support, an adequate (albeit barely) cadre of teachers, and satisfactory (again albeit, barely) financial support given to these schools. I believe the children of this community may well be, as a collective, the best Jewishly schooled generation ever. My concern would be significantly

higher for a set of schools in a less supportive environment than the one in which this research takes place.

Rabbi Abraham Rice, the first ordained rabbi to serve a Jewish community on this continent, lamented, in mid-nineteenth century Baltimore: “I wonder whether it is even permissible for a Jew to live in this land” (Diner, 2004, p. 129). He was observing the swift erosion of religiously observant Judaism. To look at vibrant classrooms filled with children who identify themselves as Jewish, the children of families who chose to affiliate with a synagogue movement that defines itself as *halachic* (devoted to Jewish law), an answer to Rabbi Rice could be a qualified yes, dependent on how or who defines “permissible.” The American Jewry of today is not the segregated community that spiritually thrived in Europe until a series of revolutions in the mid-19th century, the one a succession of tsars in the last decades of that century provoked toward a mass migration to America, or who were subject to the anti-religious Russian Soviet dictates through most of the 20th century.

Abram (1996) writes about narrative traditions that make a transition from oral to written, as the *Torah* does in the fifth century BCE, and says:

Writing down oral stories renders them separable, for the first time, from the actual places where the events in those stories occurred. The tales can now be carried elsewhere; they can be read in distant cities or even on alien continents. The stories, soon, come to seem independent of any specific locale. (p. 183)

History has moved forward. The Jewish community has been re-created oceans away from Rice’s Europe and America, adapting to local challenges and conditions, unforeseen in the ancient academies in which the *Talmud* originated, or the *yeshivot* (academies for intensive Jewish study) of his time. While the sacred text remains a powerful, uniting force bringing together community, a concern arises as to the consequences should even

this independent connection becomes tenuous, that the stories, the text, lose contextual meaning.

With a written tradition there is a parallel narrative, an oral tradition that accompanies religious life. This tradition is found in the recollections of family gatherings for holidays, the stories attached to ritual items that have been passed down from parent to child, and the unusual practices developed within a family or a particular community. Parent involvement could restore this eco-system. The landscape has changed over the course of a generation. The parents of many of the children in our schools grew up in Jewish neighborhoods, dated within the faith, went to universities with significant Jewish populations, and knew that they were breaking new ground if marrying a non-Jew. For the most part, all of those conditions have become a thing of the past and are generally not the case in suburban Washington, DC. Will we go forward to a new reality or attempt to recover a lost world? Will this generation's leadership be remembered as one that chose "neglect and indifference" (Heidegger, 1998, p. 144) rather than engagement?

In a way, we live our personal *midrash*, the story between the lines of the *Torah*. Personally and privately, we can be the rebels who defied Moses, the supporters who affirmed his leadership, those who selectively heard his message, or those who didn't listen at all. Today's Conservative leadership is challenged to engage parents in a conversation as to the nature and direction of this movement if it is to be sustained as a uniquely principled, energetic, diversely observant, non-Orthodox community. Many of my conversants had direct contact with that immigrant generation, a generation that may

not recognize the *Yiddishkeit* of the current parent-child generation, but could be in awe of the vibrant Jewish life that could characterize American-Jewish life.

Crossing the Divide

Rav asked him, What do you do?
I am a teacher of young children and I teach the children of the poor just like the children of the rich; And whoever is unable to pay, I do not take anything from him. And I have a fishpond and whoever is lazy, I bribe him with them, and I prepare for him, and I mollify him, until he comes and studies. (*Talmud, Taanit* 24a)

My conversants are contemporary versions of that ancient teacher. They welcome all varieties of students to their classes and they take advantage of the unique resources they have to attract their enthusiastic interest. In the process, they traverse the divides separating students from teachers, text, tradition, and connection with Jewish life. One of the first references in the *Torah* to teaching is in *Shemot*, the second of the five books. In referring to the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, the text commands, “And you shall explain it to your son on that day [*Pesah*], ‘It is because of what the Lord did to me when I went free from Egypt’” (*Torah, Shemot* 13:8). Teachers bring an important message to tell their students, offering guidance and instruction for a good and virtuous life. Holtz (2003) writes, “We do need to be aware of what the challenges are—looking carefully at the culture around us ... an antidote to some of the weaknesses in the culture” (p. 32). This is another divide they brave, between the world of the *Torah* and that of suburban America.

Rachel describes that generational divide in an exchange of iPods during a field trip:

Steven gives me his iPod, so we trade iPods and so he is listening to all my Beatles, and I am listening to, I am even embarrassed to tell you the title of, let alone what the words were and I said to him, you know, don’t you feel stupid

singing some of this and he just kind of looked at me and I said you know I am going to sound like a fuddy-duddy parent but what you get out of this, I mean great rhythm, okay fine. Terrific. The words are just so, you know, you are too intelligent to simply sing this kind of crap, and you know he said like yea, yea.

To be sure, there is a gap between a psychedelic sensibility and rap culture at play. At the same time there is a direct confrontation, a consciousness raising challenge being posed that might not necessarily take place otherwise. Adding to the significance of the exchange is the atmosphere in which this dialogue takes place, synagogue-school, which is a factor that will elevate the level of the discussion. Abram (1996) addresses this in saying, “The singular magic of a place is evident from what happens there, from what befalls oneself or others when in its vicinity” (p. 182).

There are intangible dynamics that enable the synagogue-school teacher to overcome reluctance on a child’s part to contemplate alternative ways of being, of challenging the attraction of a dominant culture. A great achievement that is brought about at the hands of these teachers is inherent in the charge Buber (2000) makes in his essay, *The Man of Today and the Jewish Bible*: “If he is really serious, he too can open up to this book and let its rays strike him where they will ... without preconceived notions and without reservations” (p. 5).

Jacob Becomes Israel

וַיִּאבֶּק אִישׁ עִמּוֹ עַד עֲלֹת הַשָּׁחַר ... וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יֵאמָר עוֹד שְׁמִי
כִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּזְכָּל (בראשית לב:כה, כט)

And a man wrestled with him [Jacob] until the break of dawn Said he, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” (*Bereshit* 32: 26, 29)

A common theme I hear in synagogue-school classrooms is the flawed character of so many Biblical figures. For all their exemplary traits, Moses is sometimes short

tempered, Joseph is egotistical, Miriam gossips, Rebecca is conniving, and even God's anger is sometimes questionable. That in the end these figures are redeemed, is in part because of the personal transformations shaped by their experiences. In the quote above, Jacob, so named because he was born gripping the heel of his older twin brother, became Israel, one who wrestles with God.

This research process has been a personally transformative experience for me as well, one of striving to reveal the hidden and wrestling with sacred beings. As Levinas (1961/1979) writes, "It is the relation with the other, inscribed in the body as its elevation, that makes possible the transformation of enjoyment into consciousness and labor" (p. 117). It has been an experience of engaging in intense dialogue on the field of synagogue-school teaching, work that has been a personal passion for decades. An influence of this process has been to see my level of understanding of this work progress from it being a satisfying, technique driven pursuit to unforeseen degrees of meaning and possibility.

I have been struck by the radiance of my conversants and the world into which they welcomed me. Along the way I developed a new appreciation for the amazing job these teachers perform. I came to discern the alternative educational setting they create, perpetually being held up to the standard of the secular schools, and typically eliciting student enthusiasm, appreciation, and support for their efforts. I am inspired by the direction with which these teachers guide their charges, particularly given the ambiguities to the curricular mandate assigned them. There is the sense that the time children spend in this setting is a precious island in time, a special meaningful experience of Jewish life. In

turn, it has added a dimension to my appreciation for those intervals in which teachers engage with children in the synagogue-school.

One particularly, meaningful personal shift has been that the measure of certainty with which I viewed synagogue-school teaching has been replaced by the uncertainty of the many more questions this investigation has provoked. I entered into this process believing that phenomenology held significant potential for revealing aspects of the synagogue-school that could not be penetrated by other methodologies. Given the opportunity, I now would like to investigate the synagogue-school experience from the perspective of its students. *Bar* and *Bat Mitzvah* are milestones, dividing lines, of sorts, for children. I would be particularly interested in further exploring the meaning of this experience with third through sixth grade students on one side of this divide, those balancing preparation and completion for that coming-of-age ceremony with their synagogue-school studies, and ninth and tenth graders on the other side, slightly removed from that event.

My interest in parents has increased greatly, particularly piqued by their role in this study, enthusiastic supporter in some cases, an uncooperative hindrance in others, but ultimately the facilitator of their children's participation in this cultural-educational project. Parents also offer interesting diversity, including such dynamics of non-Jewish spouses, converts, and those with different degrees of experience and commitment to religious observance.

One other dynamic that calls for my attention is the potential of looking into this phenomenon in alternative settings. Such places might be where resources or communal support are different, such as communities with varying degrees of general and Jewish

population density, an Upper West Side Manhattan neighborhood on the one hand or a more isolated part of the country such as Montana or Alaska. Even farther afield would be Diaspora countries (anywhere outside of Israel) in which Jewish community thrives.

I have had the opportunity to explore the lived experience of teaching sacred text in a synagogue-school setting of eight exceptional individuals. For the future, my interviewing of potential teachers, supervision, decisions on whether or not to renew contracts, and the administrative relationship will be greatly affected by the insights I have gained. These individuals have offered me a new understanding of the meaning of curriculum, the limits and potential of an official vision, and the evolution of content material over the course of years in a teacher's hands. My conversants bring a remarkable sense of vision and purpose to their craft. They are exemplary people who influence ways of being and thinking of young people and their parents. In the process, they explore their own Judaism and their own being. They are inheritors of a centuries old tradition, facing some of the same challenges teachers have confronted in any era. Creatively, they deal with the unique challenges of their day.

What does it mean to be a teacher of sacred text in a synagogue school setting? It means to be entrusted with the *neshama*, the Jewish soul, of the parents, the congregation, and above all the child. It is to join a community of practitioners who historically have stepped forward to take on the society's responsibility to educate its children in a religious tradition, where failure poses elements of existential danger to cultural survival. The ancient teaching, "[One] who preserves one soul of Israel is considered as if [they] had preserved the whole world" (*Talmud, Bava Batra* 11a), is as prescient in these

teachers' consciousness as it would be if it was the newly drafted text of a school's mission statement or a statement in their employment contracts.

To be a synagogue-school teacher is to be in a perpetual state of reviewing and revising pedagogy and content, to experience the joy of students arriving at an understanding of esoteric, abstract concepts, or the frustration of obstacles to achieving that mandate. It is to assume many identities, tuned in to popular culture, knowledgeable in an ancient tradition, and able to speak the language of children while being the adult in the room. It is to be the ultimate "in-between," transiting the divide separating the spiritual world and the material, an ideal vision of society and the practical reality of contemporary civilization, and ancient world values and situational relativistic ones. Above all, it is to take on the public identity of Jewish educator, to be introduced as such, and to be seen in the eyes of many in that role.

For this exploration I have worked with the metaphor of the journey outdoors. Experiences with nature, travels through woods, mountains, rivers, and seas always carry elements of the unpredictable. There is a particular character who is comfortable with uncertainty and is energized and revitalized by the encounter. We live in a world where it is increasingly apparent that the natural environment is unstable and endangered. Habitat is threatened, species verge on extinction, and life threatening medical conditions that were unheard of a generation ago are a part of everyday life. Our environment has turned toxic. These are the conditions that abundantly illustrate the lived experience of the synagogue-school teacher. While America has been a welcoming land for the Jewish people, it has also proven a challenge to maintaining a unique Jewish identity. Just as everyone on the planet benefits from clean air, healthy rainforests, and pristine

waterways, these teachers devote themselves to preserve those elements in the conviction that Jewish civilization has much to give to the humanistic environment of this country and the world. It takes strength of character to look into the headwind of American culture, lean into it, and push forward saying, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the rest is commentary. Go and learn it” (*Talmud, Shabbat 31a*).

Appendix A

Louis A. Nagel
12313 Point Field Drive
Fulton, Maryland 20759
301.854.0054 (h) 301.652.8569 x310 (w)
LANagel@comcast.net

October, 2006

Dear Teacher

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that explores the lived experience of synagogue-school teachers. Your school's Education Director referred me to you. I am conducting this study as a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership at the University of Maryland, College Park, under the direction of Dr. Francine Hultgren.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of synagogue-school teachers as they teach *tefillah* and *Torah* to religious school students. As I seek to understand this experience, research strategies you will be called upon to be a part of will include: conversations, observations, group meetings and personal writing, all of which will provide text for analysis. You will be asked to engage approximately in two tape-recorded and transcribed conversations with me, approximately three months apart, each approximately one-and-a-half to two hours in length; engage approximately in one tape-recorded and transcribed group conversation with all six-eight teachers together, approximately one-and-a-half to two hours in length; be observed for one-three mutually agreed upon class sessions; and provide two written reflections of experiences of teaching *tefillah* or *Torah*. This represents a time commitment of approximately eight hours over a period of four-five months. This process will begin in the Fall 2006 and extend into the Spring 2007 semester. Any comments you make and the reflections you write will be used anonymously. You will not be identified by name in the published findings or in oral presentations, unless you choose to have your name revealed. After the research is complete, you are welcome to review the results and I will be glad to provide you with information about any publications that ensue. I will be making a contribution of \$180 to the synagogue-school of each teacher who participates in this study, in honor of that teacher.

This study will make an important contribution to understanding the lived experiences of synagogue-school teachers and their experience of teaching sacred text to religious school students. The research will be considered successful if someone who knows nothing about synagogue school teaching reads the narratives you provide and understands the joys and sorrows that come with synagogue-school teaching. Also, the pedagogical insights should help enhance the teaching that goes on in synagogue-schools.

I am interested in setting up initial conversations for late Fall. If you have any questions and/or would like to be one of my conversants, please contact me. Thank you for your consideration.

B'Shalom,

Louis A. Nagel
Doctoral Candidate
Education Policy and Leadership
University of Maryland, College Park

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Page 1 of 3

Initials _____ Date _____

Project Title	TEACHING THE SACRED: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SYNAGOGUE-SCHOOL TEACHERS
Why is this research being done?	This is a research project being conducted by Louis Nagel at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are a synagogue-school teacher with over five years of teaching experience in a Conservative congregation. The purpose of this research project is to gain an understanding of the lived experience of teaching <i>Torah</i> or <i>tefillah</i> in a synagogue-school.
What will you be asked to do?	<p>The procedures involve: conversations, observations, group meetings and personal writing, all of which will provide text for analysis. Topics for these activities include: experiences that served to form a commitment to synagogue school teaching, experiences in teaching <i>tefillah</i> and <i>Torah</i>, and experiences as a member of a synagogue school faculty.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You will engage approximately in two tape-recorded and transcribed conversations, approximately three months apart, each approximately one-and-a-half to two hours in length; • You will engage approximately in one tape-recorded and transcribed group meeting, approximately one-and-a-half to two hours in length; • You will be observed for one-three mutually agreed upon class sessions; and • You will be asked to provide two written reflections of my experiences of teaching <i>tefillah</i> or <i>Torah</i>. <p>This represents a time commitment of approximately eight hours over a period of four-five months.</p>
What about confidentiality?	<p>We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. To help protect your confidentiality, notes, transcripts and cassette tapes will be accessible only to the researcher and kept in a locked cabinet in his residence. At the completion of this study, the tapes will be erased, and written records will be shredded.</p> <p>You will only be referred to in the final document by first name or an alternative name, should you prefer. Your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</p>

Project Title	TEACHING THE SACRED: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SYNAGOGUE-SCHOOL TEACHERS
What are the risks of this research?	There are no known risks associated with participating in this research project.
What are the benefits of this research?	This research is not designed to help you personally, but the results may help the investigator learn more about synagogue-school teachers' experiences of teaching <i>tefillah</i> and <i>Torah</i> in order to inform policy and practice in synagogue-school education.
Do you have to be in this research? May you stop participating at any time?	Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.
What if you have questions?	<p>If you have any questions about the research study itself, please contact:</p> <p>Louis A. Nagel 12313 Point Field Drive Fulton, MD 20759 lanagel@comcast.net 301.854.0054 (h) 301.652.8569 x310 (w)</p> <p>This research is being conducted by:</p> <p>Dr. Francine Hultgren Department of Education Policy & Leadership University of Maryland College Park, MD 20742 fh@umd.edu 301.405.4562</p> <p>If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, 20742; (e-mail) irb@deans.umd.edu; (telephone) 301-405-0678</p> <p>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</p>

Project Title	TEACHING THE SACRED: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SYNAGOGUE-SCHOOL TEACHERS	
Statement of Age of Participant and Consent <i>[Please note: Parental consent always needed for minors.]</i>	<i>Your signature indicates that:</i> <i>you are at least 18 years of age;</i> <i>the research has been explained to you;</i> <i>your questions have been fully answered; and</i> <i>you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.</i>	
Signature and Date <i>[Please add name, signature, and date lines to the final page of your consent form]</i>	NAME OF PARTICIPANT	
	SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT	
	DATE	

Appendix C

Points of Departure for Conversations on the Lived Experience of Teaching Sacred Text

Questions:

1. What does it mean to you to be a synagogue-school teacher?
2. What is the meaning of sacred to you?
3. Describe a teaching experience in which you profoundly felt a sense of the sacred.
4. What is the process you go through in teaching a prayer, verse or chapter of sacred text?
5. How do you experience the gap between the degree of religious observance you personally live, the level you promote through your teaching and the actual degree to which that reflects the home and life of your students?
6. What is it like to teach concepts, value terms and language that are directly linked with a long ago era?
7. Describe some meaningful pedagogical engagements you have had with students.

Themes for Teacher Writing Samples:

Write a narrative description of your experience teaching a prayer or Torah verse.

Write a narrative describing your experience of a particular student.

Appendix D

Guidelines for Teacher Writing Samples

Themes for Teacher Writing Samples:

1. Write a narrative description of your experience teaching a prayer or Torah verse.
2. Write a narrative describing your experience of a particular student.

Instructions to teacher:

Essay number 1

Please write a one-two paragraphs long essay. Think of a particular classroom experience with teaching a prayer or Torah verse. Some aspects to consider in composing this composition are what it felt like to have the experience, how you experienced time, space, and/or relationship. A good essay will bring me as close as possible to the experience as you lived it. This exercise should take no longer than an hour.

Essay number 2

Please write a one-two paragraphs long essay. Think of an experience with a particular student. Some aspects to consider in composing this composition are what it felt like to have the experience, how you experienced time, space, and/or relationship. A good essay will bring me as close as possible to the experience as you lived it. This exercise should take no longer than an hour.

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